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THE HANDSOME HUMES

BY

WILLIAM BLACK

NEW EDITION

LONDON

SAMPSON LOW, MARSTON & COMPANY
LIMITED

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THE HANDSOME HUMES.

CHAPTER I.

A COMING OF AGE.

ON a certain night in February a numerous and distinguished company was gradually assembling in the Marie Antoinette room of the Hôtel Métropole, Northumberland Avenue, the occasion being the coming of age of a young man called Sidney Hume. But of all the people arriving or arrived there, none presented so striking a figure as the hostess herself, a woman of quite unusual stature, straight as a wand, yet not without the presence and substantiality befitting her years, which lay between the fifties and sixties. Comely of feature, too, with a complexion, almost countrified in its clear fresh tones, that accorded well with the silvery gray of her hair ; eyes at once frank and shrewd ; a mouth good-naturedly inclined to smile, and showing, when her lips parted, perfect teeth. For this stately dame—looking all the more stately because of her costume of black velvet and old lace, with an occasional gleam of diamonds—was not at all of an austere demeanour ; nor yet was she blandly and passively gracious, as might fairly have become her height. The welcome that she extended to her guests had more than a touch of cheerful cordiality in it ; there was a quick word here, a humorous glance there ; she could maliciously laugh with this one, and instantly alter her face

to receive the next—who chanced to be a bishop. Conscious of her great personal beauty, proud of her son, pleased to have her friends come round her, she appeared to be a very happy woman in these auspicious circumstances, and she took no pains to conceal the fact. A slight insistence in her speech—a sort of persuasive downrightness—she may have derived from her Scotch upbringing; otherwise she betrayed no trace of accent, as she chatted with this one and that, obviously in the highest of high spirits.

Meanwhile the young man whose four-and-twentieth birthday had brought these people together was also doing his part—moving about the murmuring room with a slip of names in his hand—giving whispered directions as to who was to take down whom to dinner—furnishing introductions where that was needful—and so forth. He also was tall, and of a well-built, slim figure; his face clean-shaven; his features of a distinctly intellectual cast; his brown hair worn rather long; his eyes grave and attentive; his manner somewhat reserved. He seemed inclined to listen respectfully rather than to talk, especially if the person he was addressing happened to be older than himself; he had not yet acquired that self-confidence, that assurance of success, that knowledge of the world, that gave something of a conquering air to the silver-haired lady who now stood near the door, laughing and talking and welcoming each new arrival. But in the matter of good looks, he was a worthy son of that proud dame: did not he, too, belong to “the handsome Humes”?

By-and-by this reception-chamber—which was filled with a sort of mysterious twilight from rose-shaded lamps and candles—had mustered its complement of guests; and then it was that Sidney Hume gave his arm to a little old lady whose rank entitled her to this precedence, and led the way, the other couples following in due order, the hostess coming last along with the bishop afore-mentioned—the Right Reverend the Lord Bishop of Wilchester, to wit. Their destination was the drawing-room, which had upon this

particular evening been converted into a dining-room ; and here indeed was a change from the hushed, mysterious, rose-hued chamber they had just left. This great saloon, with its lofty pillars and branching palms, its white and gold walls and roof, was all ablaze with clusters of electric lights ; the long table was a splendour of flowers and silver and crystal ; while from behind a screen that stretched across one portion of the apartment came the softly modulated strains of a stringed band. There was some slight confusion in seeking for places, but that was soon over ; the music ceased ; the guests remained standing ; and the bishop—a little pale-faced, nervous-looking man—said grace. Then they all took their seats ; and the talk began.

Now most of those people knew each other—many of them, indeed, being near relatives ; but here and there were one or two who had not met before ; and among these were a couple of young folk who had been introduced to each other in the room above. The man was about eight-and-twenty ; of anæmic complexion ; with soft dark eyes ; and beard and moustache clipped in the French fashion ; the young lady whom he had brought down was a rather good-looking lass, with an abundance of fluffy blond hair, a pleasant smile, and a pince-nez. Her companion made sure of her name by glancing at the card on the table ; then he started off.

“Do you know many of those here to-night ?” he asked.

“It is my business,” answered this damsel, with demure eyes, “to know everybody. I am a lady journalist.”

He did not seem much alarmed.

“You don’t say !” he observed, quietly. “I am, in a fashion, connected with newspapers myself—on the other side. Washington.”

“Oh, Washington ?” said the young lady, and then she seemed inclined to giggle—which was wrong. “You have a great deal of society in Washington, haven’t you ? I

suppose you might consider Washington the headquarters of American society?"

"Why, yes, I suppose it is," he responded; "especially when Congress is in session. There are plenty of entertainments—and all the Presidential and diplomatic dinners——"

"And does Mrs. Hume understand that you write for the Washington papers?" was the next question—put with perfect seriousness, though there was laughter in the creature's gray eyes.

"Hardly that," said this prematurely old young man with the worn face. "I may have mentioned my paper, but I don't write for it, beyond sending a cable despatch now and again. I am part proprietor, in fact; that is all my connection with journalism. But you said you knew everybody; tell me, then, about our hostess and her son. You see, I merely made his acquaintance in the smoke-room; we had some talk several times; then he introduced me to his mother, and she was good enough to invite me to this dinner. And here I am. But all I know of her is that she is about the most extraordinarily handsome woman I ever beheld——"

"Handsome?" repeated his neighbour. "Did you never hear of 'the handsome Hays'?"

His look confessed his ignorance.

"Not of the three famous beauties—the three tall sisters—who came up from Teviot-side to take all London by storm? You never heard of 'the handsome Hays'—'the beautiful Miss Hays,' as they were called—that all the town ran after, so that they had crowds waiting to see them go into a theatre? Of course it is all ancient history now—five-and-thirty years ago and more; but I've had to get up the particulars—for—yes, for an article I am writing; and besides, I know Mrs. Hume very well——"

At this moment the band behind the white and gold screen began to play 'There was a lad was born in Kyle.'

"Do you hear that?" the young lady continued.

"She is wildly proud of her Scotch lineage; and I shouldn't be surprised if she had chosen nothing but Scotch airs for this evening. Shouldn't be in the least surprised——"

"But you were telling me of the three famous beauties," her companion reminded her.

"Why, this is one of them! There she is. This one was the youngest of the three. And her two sisters were considered to have done well enough—they both married titles; but it was thought that the youngest had done better than either of them when she captured the Squire of Ellerdale—one of the greatest properties in the north of England. For the truth is they had come to London with nothing but their face for their fortune—and an unbounded pride of race, of course—an old tower on Teviot-side, and a prophecy of Thomas the Rhymer all to themselves——"

"So she was one of the three beauties?" the American said, regarding his hostess with something of a curious scrutiny. "I can well understand it."

"Oh, but that was a generation ago," exclaimed this family chronicler with the unbridled flaxen hair. "We don't talk about the handsome Hays now; it is the handsome Humes. Five sons and four daughters—that is something of a family; and all of them remarkably good-looking; and all of them fortunately married and settled, thanks to the engineering capabilities of an extremely astute mamma—all of them, I mean, except this young Sidney, and she'll soon get him fixed when she thinks the time is come. Oh, she is a clever one," continued the young person, whose comments on her hostess were not without a spice of malice. "They call her the most successful woman in England. She is a born manager, shrewd and capable, and doing everything with such an appearance of good-humour that you would never suspect her of schemes. The most successful woman in England? I should think so! One after the other, son and daughter—all

prosperously established ; and then, instead of remaining in possession of Ellerdale Park, as she might have done, she must needs vacate the premises, so that her eldest son should reign undisturbed as the Squire. Of course that leaves her free too. She can move about—Rome, Naples, Nice—wherever the society is most to her mind. At present she has a house at Henley——”

The band began to play ‘Loudon’s bonnie woods and braes.’

“Didn’t I tell you ?” said this communicative damsel. “We shall have Scotch airs all the evening—though the Humes of Ellerdale are an English family. But where was I in my information ? Oh yes, Henley. I said Henley——”

As she paused for a second, he turned and stole an inquiring glance at her. She seemed amused. When she next spoke it was in a lowered voice.

“Don’t look just now—while I am talking to you ; but in a second or two turn your attention to the lady who is sitting on Sidney Hume’s left——”

“I have already noticed her.”

“And not recognised her ? Haven’t you seen her photographs in the shop windows, among the fashionable beauties ? ”

And indeed it might have been assumed that the lady thus indicated would be able to hold her own in any such collection ; for although she was not so striking in appearance as the statuesque dame at the head of the table, she was sufficiently attractive-looking in a younger and slighter fashion. What was visible of her figure—through these intervening flowers—was elegant and graceful ; her features were refined ; her complexion clear and colourless, with just a touch of make-up ; her eyebrows high and well marked ; her masses of black hair loosely and effectively arranged. And if there was something about her forehead and mouth that denoted considerable decision of character, that, on the other hand, was softened by the

expression of her eyes, which were very beautiful eyes—clear gray with dark pupils, intensified by black lashes: eyes that had an amiable and intelligent look, and were rather given, as one might suspect, to quiet and humorous observation. For the rest, her costume was of pale blue crêpe de Chine, open square at the neck, with a collar of white swan's-down; heavy bands of gold were on her gloved arms; but she wore no ornament round her finely modelled throat.

"Who is she?" asked the American, in an undertone.

"That is Lady Helen Yorke," answered the flaxen-haired maiden, keeping her eyes resolutely fixed upon her plate. "And she is the only daughter—the only child—of the Earl of Monks-Hatton. Would it surprise you to hear that Lord Monks-Hatton has a seat near Henley?"

The young lady (one blushes to confess it) sniggered.

"I don't quite understand——" her companion said.

"Oh, do you think I would make any suggestion?" she protested. "Certainly not! I couldn't think of such a thing. But Lady Helen is a great heiress. And she has refused all sorts of offers—so they say; and no one knows why; perhaps she has a bit of a temper, and is rather difficult to please. At the same time she'd better look out; she's getting on; seven-and-twenty, I should think. And if she were to take a fancy to one of the handsome Humes? Mind, I don't say anything; only I know that the Monks-Hattons live near Henley—one of their seats; and I know that Mrs. Hume and Lady Helen are great friends; and I perceive, with my own eyes, who it is who is sitting on Sidney Hume's left. For if he had to take down the dowager Duchess because of her rank, there was the other place next him; and a skilfully managing mamma—But perhaps I'm very wicked to suspect such things. And indeed I don't think Sidney Hume is of the marrying kind—from what little I've seen of him. Oh no, for him there's no one like his mother. You could boil down all the women in England into one, and she would be in his eyes nothing

to compare with the magnificent mamma. He is just desperately proud of her——”

“And she of him?”

“Oh, I suppose so! Those Humes have been so courted and flattered that they think all the virtues and graces and good looks in England belong to their family by rights.”

‘Sweet Annie frae the sea beach came,’ the band played behind the screen; and perhaps it was the gentleness of the melody that interposed to soften the acerbity of this young lady’s remarks; at all events, she went on to speak of Sidney Hume himself in quite a friendly and kindly way. She said it was a pity he mured himself up in his college at Oxford. Degrees, honours, fellowships, should be reserved for persons of ungainly physique. Men of heroic mould should come out into the great world, to play their part.

Meanwhile what of the “most successful woman in England,” who was seated up there at the head of the table? Surely she must have confessed to herself that this was a very gay and brilliant scene over which she was presiding—the profusion of flowers being especially remarkable: camellias, tulips, hyacinths, primulas, cyclamens, with here and there masses of maidenhair fern in the tall silver dishes. Radiant light and colour; a scented atmosphere; soft music stealing in from time to time; animated talk with little bursts of laughter: what more could be desired? No wonder that this gracious hostess, when she turned from contemplating the busy table to answer the remarks of the bishop who sat next her, wore a pleased and complacent air!

“My views, bishop, about Sidney?” she said. “I hardly know that I have any—any more than he has himself—the long, lazy boy! Oh no!” she added, instantly correcting herself. “Not lazy—not at all; but the fact is that acquiring knowledge seems to come so easily to him, and he is interested in such a multitude of things, that you would be astonished to find how much he had stored up, in that apparently idle and dawdling way of his. Just an

encyclopædia, without taking any trouble about it! And yet what good is it all to him? And even if he were to devote himself to something special, the professions are all overstocked. There's the Indian civil service, no doubt: that offers good prospects for a young fellow who has done as well at his university as Sidney has done—but I fear it is too late in the day——” Here she laughed. “Well, bishop, I must tell you the truth. Sometimes I think that as I have given up all my other sons and my daughters, I should be allowed to keep my single remaining boy to myself. And then again I reproach myself for such a selfish feeling, and think I would rather give him up too if I could see him comfortably settled. It would only be an additional home for me to visit occasionally; and you know I have so many homes, with all those boys and girls married, that I never can accept half the invitations——”

“You are a fortunate mother-in-law,” said his lordship, with a little laugh.

“And as for Sidney,” continued Mrs. Hume, in her blithe way. “Who knows what may happen? Do you remember the old ballad, bishop?

*‘Oh, father, oh, father,
An ye think it fit,
We’ll send him a year
To the college yet:
We’ll sew a green ribbon
Round about his hat,
And that will let them ken
He’s to marry yet.’*

Greater wonders than that have happened.”

“Ah, I perceive—I perceive,” said the bishop, thoughtfully. “And when does Mr. Sidney close his university career?”

“The sooner the better, I should be inclined to say, if only I could get him to tear himself away from his beloved college. I suppose I shall have to bribe him; and the bribe will have to be something Greek. I shall have to promise to help him in hunting for Greek gems, or in excavating some Greek ruin, or in raising a rebellion

among the Greeks of some Turkish island. A rebellion—I shouldn't at all wonder if he were to devote this little fortune that now becomes his to some such mad enterprise ; and then, after all, I might have to support a beggar son in the end."

Now amid these various plans and projects in connection with this young man's future, that contained in the lines quoted by Mrs. Hume must have sunk into the bishop's mind ; and eventually it paved the way for a very pretty little incident. On an occasion of this kind, his lordship remarked to his neighbour, formal speech-making was unnecessary and uncalled-for ; still—might not a few words, expressing the good wishes of the company, be permitted ? Mrs. Hume smiled most grateful thanks : it had been her own secret desire that the bishop should perform this kindly office, though she had not ventured to say so. Then, as there chanced to be a lull in the traffic of the servants, the bishop got up. There was instant silence. Naturally and inevitably he began by saying he would not make a speech ; and forthwith proceeded to make it. It was a clever and incisive little oration, whether it was unpremeditated or not ; there was only one Latin phrase in it—about the obligation of maintaining the dignity of an ancient name ; and there were some ingenious references to the happy fortune of one who had in his turn inherited certain qualities of character and person that had rendered his family distinguished through more than one generation. Finally, said the good bishop, though he would not touch upon the legal conditions that had constituted this second coming of age, nevertheless Mr. Sidney (as he might be allowed to call him, having known so many older members of the family) had now to be complimented on having fully succeeded to man's estate ; and they might be pardoned if they looked forward to yet another important occasion. That occasion would arise when their young friend should present to them his chosen helpmeet and life companion ; and she (he was sure) would receive from all of them the

same welcome and the same earnest good wishes for all blessings, temporal and eternal, which they were now heartily tendering to himself. Quite an excellent little speech; and when the bishop had finished, the men rose and raised their glasses; there were murmured cries of "Sidney! Sidney!" "Hume! Hume! Good luck to you!" and the like. It may have been a mere coincidence, or it may have been one of the artful wiles of the founder of the feast, but at this moment the band interposed with 'Come fye let us a' to the bridal!'

Then young Hume got up. It was an awkward position; but he bore himself modestly, and that bespoke favour. His words, indeed, were few—thanks for their presence and their good wishes, and so forth; but it was thus he wound up:

"His lordship has been good enough to hint of another occasion when I might be able to present to you a helpmeet and companion—a sweetheart, I suppose. But, ladies and gentlemen, I have already chosen my sweetheart. And I dare say every one thinks that his sweetheart is the incomparable one of all the world—in beauty, and kindness, and accomplishments, and tried affection. At least that is my case——"

"Goodness me!" said the flaxen-haired young lady to her American acquaintance. "Is he going to announce his engagement?"

"That is my case," young Hume continued. "And I cannot do better, ladies and gentlemen, than ask you to be so very kind as to drink her health."

He raised his glass—and bowed low to his mother. It was simply, and naturally, and gracefully done; and it was a great success—much clapping of hands ensuing; while as for Mrs. Hume, though she exclaimed "The rascal!" she was immensely delighted; she blushed and laughed like a school-girl—at sight of those upraised glasses; and demanded of the bishop what should be done to a boy that thus made a fool of his old mother

“Bravo, Sidney!” cried a brother-in-law, who had the look of an M. F. H. about him. “If you stick to them sentiments, you’ll save yourself a heap of trouble in this world.”

And the nervous little bishop laughed and applauded too, and was quite proud of his share in the impromptu performance; he said if he had been told beforehand he could not more conclusively have elicited an opinion which did so much honour to both mother and son.

And in due course of time the long and merry evening came to an end; and when the guests, in various groups, had bidden good-bye to their hostess, and were proceeding to take their departure, Sidney Hume went along to the outer hall to see them off. Thither also, as soon as the room was finally cleared, wandered Mrs. Hume and Lady Helen, the former with her hand placed affectionately within the arm of the latter; and there these two remained as spectators, watching the carriages come up and drive away. Accordingly, when the young man had fulfilled his duty and was returning through the hall, he found the two ladies awaiting him.

“Sidney,” said his mother, in her gaily masterful way, “we want you. Helen is coming up to my room to have a little private confabulation over the events of the evening, and you must come too, and get us something in the way of a night-cap, you know, for the sake of our nerves.”

“Very well, mother,” he said, obediently; and he followed them up the staircase and along the corridor, until they had arrived at Mrs. Hume’s sitting-room.

But no sooner were they within this warm and cheerfully lit apartment, than it became clear that Mrs. Hume was herself going to be responsible for the snugness and comfort of this little family party—if so it might be regarded. She rang the bell and ordered coffee. She went to a sideboard and produced a bottle of Benedictine, with three liqueur glasses. She had three comfortable arm-chairs drawn in towards the fire. And presently, when she had brought the

Benedictine and the glasses over, she took a box of cigarettes—perhaps as a temptation, perhaps as a jest—and offered it to Lady Helen.

Curiously enough, at the very moment that the younger lady received the box into her hands, she happened to glance instinctively towards the tall young man who still stood by the table; and apparently she saw in his face—not disapproval, for that would have been impertinence: what right of criticism or control over her, had he? but—an indefinable something that instantly caused her to change her mind. She rose from her chair, and put the box on the mantel-shelf.

“How can you bring such a charge against me, Mrs. Hume?” she protested, with laughing indignation. “You only saw me once—for a piece of mischief. Here, Mr. Sidney; don’t you want the cigarettes?”

“No, thank you,” he said, without drawing near.

“Oh, you need not offer them to Sidney,” his mother interposed, as she settled herself in the chair opposite that of Lady Helen. “He wouldn’t smoke in the presence of a woman for ten thousand worlds. It’s one of his fads.”

“It is merely an old-fashioned prejudice, and it hurts no one,” he said, in self-defence.

“I am not so sure—I am not so sure,” his mother insisted. “I like to see a man smoking; it makes for companionship and sociability. For example, now, at this moment, if you were smoking, you would be seated in this chair between Helen and me, telling us all about the ghost that is playing pranks at St. Mary Hall, showing us your latest treasures—wretched little books that are only rare because of their wrong paging—and so on; instead of which you are lounging over there by the table, taking no notice of us.”

It was a direct reproof; and he had been well brought up. He came and took the empty seat between these two: the three of them made a kind of semicircle round the fire.

“Well, I have nothing wonderful to show you,” he said.

"But I picked up a couple of very good coins to-day; they may interest you." He took them from his waistcoat pocket, and handed one of them, a small gold piece, to his mother. "That is a *stater* of Philip II. of Macedon—the great time, you know, for coinage—and if you look at the head of Apollo on that one, you will find it perfectly beautiful—something like the head of the Venus of Milo, in fact. The other side? Oh, that is the king driving a *biga*."

And had he no word for the Lady Helen, who sat mute and listening, with perhaps a furtive glance from time to time at the young man himself, at the fine set of his head and shoulders, his somewhat pale intellectual features, and the soft brown of his hair? At last he turned to her, and offered her the other coin.

"That is a bronze of Hadrian," he said, with a certain indifference. "Nothing very uncommon, except, perhaps, as to its condition."

But she appeared to be much interested in the two small figures in classic dress, the one standing and holding out his hand to the other kneeling, with the legend surrounding them, "RESTITVTORI ACHAIÆ." She lingered over this little bit of property, which had come warm from his pocket. "And S. C.," she said, "what does that mean?"

"Senatus consulto—by decree of the Senate," he answered her.

"And P. P.? Not parish priest?" she asked again, venturing to raise her smiling eyes to his.

"Pater patriæ," he responded, as he somewhat carelessly received back both coins. And therewith he rose. "I am afraid I must bid you good-night now," he said to the two women.

"Sidney!" his mother exclaimed. "When I thought we should have a nice quiet little chat all by our three selves! And you cannot be going to bed yet——"

"I have to finish tinkering at the 'Frogs,'" he explained, if that was an explanation.

"Tinkering at the frogs?" she repeated.

"The 'Frogs' of Aristophanes. There is to be a translation accompanying the acting version—the O. U. D. S., you know—and I must send it off by the first post to-morrow morning. So good-night, mother dear." He went forward and kissed her. "Good-night, Lady Helen," he said, shaking hands with the younger woman.

Lady Helen followed him with her eyes—those meditative, inscrutable eyes—as he left the room; and then, when he had actually gone, she sank back in her chair, with some little look of petulant disappointment.

"Bother the 'Frogs' of Aristophanes!" said Mrs. Hume, with admirable good-humour. "But now, Helen dear, you can have your cigarette if you like."

CHAPTER II.

CROWHURST FARM.

EARLY next morning Mrs. Hume was up at Paddington station, and she was accompanied by Lady Helen, who had been her guest in town. They were standing at the book-stall, when a man approached the taller of the two ladies and said,

"I beg your pardon, madam——"

She turned. He handed to her a glove she had accidentally dropped.

"Oh, thank you very, very much," she said.

He raised his hat respectfully and passed on, rejoining his companion, with whom he had been walking up and down the platform.

"What an odd-looking man!" observed Mrs. Hume, glancing after him.

"That is a remarkably pretty girl who is with him," said Lady Helen.

Meanwhile those two, unaware that they had attracted any notice or comment, were continuing their idle stroll to

and fro, entirely engrossed in each other's talk. The one of them (he who had picked up Mrs. Hume's glove for her) was a powerfully built man, especially about the shoulders ; of sallow complexion ; dark eyes and hair, the latter with a touch of gray ; and short side-whiskers. He was dressed quietly and neatly ; and his manner was quiet ; indeed, his unobtrusive, almost deprecating demeanour, and his submissive eyes, joined to the firmness of his features and the massive strength of his frame, were somehow suggestive of a bull-dog and the docile placidity of that animal. As for his companion, that was another matter. This young creature—here on a dull and commonplace platform—seemed to be the very incarnation of our English spring-time—the ideal spring-time, that is to say, the spring-time of our lyric poets, the spring-time of waving daffodils and saffron-tinted dawns, of brooks and meads and budding willows, the spring-time of youth and merriment, of gay garlands and jocund sports, of swift glances and sweet kisses and coyness. Not tall she was, yet of a perfect symmetry ; her neck slender, the head well poised ; her complexion of the rarest freshness—making one think of clambering wild roses, both snow-white and pink ; her hair of a light sunny brown, and not so carefully garnered up but that there were stray tags and tangles here and there, especially about the region of the ears ; her eyes of a pellucid blue, full of liquid light, very honest and simple of expression, meeting a stranger with frank unconcern, and then instantly withdrawn in maiden bashfulness. The dark man with the submissive expression and the powerful shoulders stooped a little and walked deliberately ; this fresh-coloured, sunny-haired young creature, so light and free of step was she, so erect and easy and lissome of carriage, so blithe and happy and eager of air, looked as though she longed to be away among daisied meadows, with swift running and laughter, and the scattering of blossoms to the April winds.

She nestled close to her father, and her arm was tightly enclosed within his.

"Dodo, I am all shivering with anticipation!" she said, with smilingly parted lips.

"Ah, but you will be disappointed, Nan; you must count on being disappointed," he said, almost anxiously. "The day is dull; everything will look dismal. And I'm afraid we are making the experiment too soon; we should have waited till the end of March, or perhaps even the beginning of May; at present there is nothing out in the garden but snowdrops and crocuses; and the woods are bare—you won't find a single primrose yet; I went looking about everywhere the day before yesterday. If I could only have found one as an encouragement for you——"

"Dodo, I am not going to be disappointed!" she said, interrupting him with a certain wilfulness. "I want to see the spring-time from the very beginning—to watch the very first symptoms of life; there will be a new wonder every day; and you and I must hunt together, you know. Oh, I can tell you, the expeditions I have been looking forward to——"

"Yes, yes, Nan, but you are expecting too much," he said, with the same anxiety. "You won't find things all as well arranged and comfortable as they were at the vicarage, perhaps; you see, you had everything there——"

"Everything—except you, Dodo!" she interposed.

"It's very nice of you to say so, Nan. But—but you must not expect too much of Crowhurst. You will find many things wrong. And it will be a great change for you; you may not like it——"

"Dodo, what are you talking about!" she remonstrated, warmly, "when the very dream of my life has come true at last!"

The guard unlocked the doors; these two entered a carriage, and no one sought to follow; and presently the train was slowly creeping out from the platform. When they got away from the station and its surroundings, the daylight whitened somewhat; but it was a long time before they reached the open country; and even then, when there

was anything of an extended view, it was a wintry-looking landscape that lay before them—a landscape of gray, green, and black—the silvery gray of a clouded sky, the harsh green of dank pasture, the purple-black of trees and hedges. But was there not also a tremulous gleam of sunshine here and there, a faint glow on some field of golden stubble or along the red furrows of some newly ploughed land? This man, at all events, was eagerly, piteously trying to persuade himself that those clouded heavens were going to break apart, that those vague shafts of light were growing stronger.

“Oh yes, Nan,” he was saying. “I shouldn’t wonder if we got a little sunlight, after all, so that your first impression of Crowhurst may not be quite so unfavourable. There is really some sunlight coming through.”

“Dodo, it is the very perfection of a spring day!” she insisted. “Don’t you feel how soft and mild the air is? And how can you talk of unfavourable impressions, when I am as happy as a bird let out of a cage? Only I wish this train would hurry quick—quick!”

They changed at Twyford, and shortly thereafter reached Henley, which was their destination. On the platform they were met by a grave-looking elderly man, who received instructions about the luggage; then they were free to go.

“That was John, the gardener, Nan,” her father explained to her. “I don’t know much about his skill as a gardener, but I got an excellent character with him, and he will do any odd thing that’s wanted about the house. Now let us see if the boy has brought down the trap for us.”

They passed out from the station into the clearer light and air, and presently Miss Anne Summers found herself regarding, with mingled surprise and admiration, an exceedingly pretty little Stanhope phaeton in darkly varnished oak, in the shafts of which was a smallish, clever-looking animal of a light cream-colour, with black mane and tail. At the horse’s head stood a diminutive tiger in

livery—boots, brass-buttoned coat, and tall hat, all very trim and correct, the whole turn-out being entirely smart and business-like.

“You don’t think, Nan,” said the girl’s father, rather timidly regarding her—“you don’t think—it doesn’t occur to you—that there may be a little suggestion of the circus——”

“Oh, how could you imagine such a thing !” she exclaimed, as she stroked the satin-smooth neck of the animal. “He is just a beautiful creature !”

“I’m glad you don’t mind,” her father said. “It wasn’t for his looks I bought him, you know—he has plenty of other qualities, as you will find—and I was a little afraid you might not care for his appearance.”

“Why, if there’s anybody in England knows better than you, Dodo, what kind of a horse to buy, I should like to know where he is !” she said, as she went on to examine with the greatest curiosity every part of the polished harness—from the rosetted head-piece, the brown leather collar, the brass-tipped shafts, the shining pad-terrets, and so on, right aft to the step enabling the small tiger to jump into his perch.

“I’m glad you don’t mind, Nan,” he said. “For this is my little present for you—a sort of welcome, you know. It is to be entirely your own—as a kind of amusement——”

“Oh, Dodo, Dodo !” the girl said, in an undertone. “What next ?—what next ?”

“Get up, then, Nan,” he said.

“What ? am I to drive ?”

“Why not ?”

“That will spoil the appearance of the whole thing !”

“Ah, but I know better, Nan. You drive very well——”

“The vicar’s pony-carriage !”

“But you have a good style. Oh yes, I know,” he said ; and he followed her into the trap, as she took up the reins and the whip, while the miniature groom released the

horse's head and got in behind. "I know, Nan," he said, as the horse, without any preliminary cantrips, at once went forward into a rapid and easy pace. "You have a good style. Shoulders square ; hands low down and well in. I don't like to see people reaching out as if they were driving an American trotter. Why, if the horse did make a mistake, they would be over on the top of him in a second—no chance of recovery !"

"Oh, Dodo, isn't that beautiful ?" she cried, looking at what now came into view.

And yet it was only a passing glimpse they got of river-side Henley : the smooth olive-green stream ; the low-arched bridge, with a shimmer of silvery sunlight on it, accurately mirrored on the still surface ; a few red-tiled houses among leafless trees ; the wooded heights above in a pale February mist. There was not a single boat moving anywhere ; nor did there seem to be any life about Henley itself, until they turned the corner, and drove into the main street.

"It is quite a pretty town in summer-time, Nan," he said, as if deprecating any harsh judgment. "It is my fault, you know, if I have brought you too soon."

"Why, how could you bring me too soon, Dodo ?" she responded—"for me, at least. If you only knew—if you could only guess—how I have been looking forward to this day ! I think it is too good to be true—I think it will all vanish, and I shall find myself back in the vicarage again, and no Dodo with me at all."

From Hart Street they turned into Bell Street and so entered upon the Oxford road ; and in due time they came in sight of a long stretch of highway which he told her was known far and wide as the Fair Mile—a noble highway indeed, with a wide space of common on each side of it, the common in its turn being bounded by twin rows of magnificent elms. And now the spring day seemed to be really declaring itself. Not only was the air warm and sweet, but the sunshine appeared to gain in strength ; the low-lying hill

on their right hand shone a dull gold, and along the top of it the leafless woods lay against a sky that had here and there a glimmer of blue. The spirits of this sallow-faced, quiet-looking man seemed to rise a little in view of the cheerful outlook.

"Oh, yes, indeed, Nan," he said to her, "you have a very good style in driving. You sit well; you keep your shoulders square, and your hands in. Many's the time I've seen you driving the pony-carriage when you little thought I was looking at you."

"What?" she said, in astonishment. "Do you mean to say, Dodo, you were ever near Chipping Pawlet without coming to see me?"

"Oh, well," he answered her, rather uneasily, "it would not have done, Nan, you know. There were the rules and regulations to be observed. The vicar and his wife might not have liked it. And I could guess what would happen if I intercepted you; you would have begged for another day at Bristol, whereas the appointed days came frequently enough."

"Ah, did they?" she said. "Not for me, then. I used to look forward to the Bristol day as the one thing to live for; and you always brought fine weather with you, Dodo, for the beautiful woods and the downs. And now there's going to be nothing but Bristol days—it's going to be all Bristol days—seven in a week!"

"I hope they won't tire you, Nan," said he, timidly.

She laughed; the happiness shining in her eyes was sufficient answer.

When they got to The Traveller's Rest—a solitary public-house of white-painted boards—they still held on in the Oxford direction, but after a space they left the main highway, and he directed her, by a series of farm roads, into an upland region of copse and heath and spinney, with undulations of field and pasture, the heights and hollows intersected by hedges and rows of still leafless trees. And at last they came to a fenced-in enclosure which seemed to

contain a good deal of green—the green of spruce and pine and ivied stumps ; there was a glimpse of red-tiled roofs and chimneys over a tall hedge of box and laurel ; then a white gate that the small groom jumped down to open.

“ This is Crowhurst, Nan,” her father said, regarding her with diffident apprehension. “ I’m afraid you’ll find it rather lonely—it is rather out of the way, isn’t it ? But then I thought you could have your choice, you know, for there’s plenty of life and gaiety at Henley, especially a little later on in the year. I hope you won’t find it too secluded.”

“ Oh, Dodo, it is a perfect Paradise ! ” she cried.

She walked the horse slowly forward, taking possession with her eyes, as it were, of every feature of the place—the shrubbery, the lawn with its plots of snowdrop and crocus, the red-tiled little porch, the yellow-gray frontage, the white wood-work, the irregular gables, the small out-jutting conservatory, and then the stables and coach-house, apparently evolved out of older farm-buildings, for there was a stain of green on the ruddy roofs, where a brass weather-cock glittered in the sun.

“ It is rather shut in on this side, don’t you think, Nan ? ” he said. “ There’s a better view from the other side of the house ; from your window especially there is a very nice view—over the woods and hollows. But come away in.”

She followed him into the toy house of which she was to be mistress, and here was a trim little maidservant awaiting them.

“ Jane,” said he, “ run and tell cook to hurry up with luncheon ; Miss Anne must be hungry.”

And then he began to show her over the place ; and she went from room to room with an ever-increasing delight and wonder ; for how had he been able to do all this by himself, even to the bowls of daffodils placed here and there ? But it was when she entered her own room upstairs, that her gladness and gratitude reached their climax. It was not a large room, but it was undoubtedly the best situated of any in the house ; there were two windows, one giving a

glimpse of the roadway and a plantation of young larch, the other commanding a spacious view southward over the garden and orchard, and over the more distant fields and hollows and wooded heights that rose into the pale sunshine of the spring sky. These were but externals. When she turned to the fittings and adornments of this chamber—to the prints and drawings, the seven-volume edition of Tennyson in a little bookshelf slung near the bed head, a large illustrated Herriek on the table by the window, the snowdrops and violets placed in glass tubes and dishes on the mantel-shelf, and a hundred similar evidences of thoughtfulness and attentive forecast—she began to recall and to understand the meaning of many a mysterious question that had been addressed to her when he and she were walking on Clifton Down, or driving along the Somersetshire lanes. She knew now. Far away back he had been trying to find out what particular things she would like to have in the room that was to be specially her own, and he had forgotten nothing.

“Nan!” he exclaimed, in great alarm—for though she had turned to the window, he could see that tears were running down her cheeks—“Nan! I knew it would be too lonely for you—I knew it; but never mind—we will find some other place—oh yes—we will find some place you will like better.”

“Oh, Dodo, Dodo, don’t make me ashamed!” she said; and she took his hand in both of hers and kissed it in gratitude. “It isn’t that—you know it isn’t that; it is because you are so good to me.”

“Then you are not—disappointed?”

“Disappointed!” she said, smiling through her tears. “When I cannot find words to tell you how beautiful everything is, and how kind you are to me!”

“Oh, that’s it, is it?” said he, recovering himself directly. “What a fright you gave me! Well, come away down, Nan: luncheon must be about ready; I hear Jane coming and going.”

So she flung her hat and jacket on the coverlet and followed him downstairs, where she found the dining-room table very prettily laid out, with more daffodils and snow-drops and crocuses, pale purple and white and gold.

"Now which do you think you will have, Nan?" he said, going first of all to the sideboard. "There will be cutlets coming in a moment, with mashed potatoes; and there's a hot steak and kidney pie, with mushrooms. I wasn't quite sure of the fish, you see, in a small inland town, but I must find out about that later on. Or, if you would rather have something cold, here's some pressed beef that looks pretty fair; and there's a fowl, and ham, and a lobster, and a tongue, and there's some endive salad that I think you'll like."

"Dodo," she remonstrated, "if I am going to manage this house, it must be in a very different fashion. What extravagance! Two hot dishes for luncheon! I cannot allow such a thing."

"It's all very well, Nan," he said, doggedly, "but I am not going to have you treated here as you were at the vicarage. No; when I went there I used to think the food was just a little too meagre. And if you don't care to wait for anything hot, well, there are other cold things here—oh yes, a lot of other things; that fool of a girl hasn't opened half of them. There's caviare—caviare is very nice on oat-cake—and there are sardines. I wonder where the mischief she has put the opener?"

He searched about and found it, and then he proceeded to prise into the metal case.

"Dodo," she said, laughing, "don't you know that refined and superior persons consider it very ignoble to put importance on what one eats or drinks?"

He stopped and looked at her inquisitively. His hand relaxed its grasp of the instrument. "Yes, I suppose that is so," he said. He came away from the sideboard. "Only, I thought you might be hungry, Nan."

She instantly perceived the mistake she had made.

"But I am—furiously hungry," she said at once. "And if you could conveniently open that box, or give me a slice of tongue, or a piece of the lobster—it's really quite delightful to see such a display on a sideboard. No, wait a moment, Dodo; here come the hot things. Suppose we begin with a cutlet?"

And so they both sat down, and he helped her to a cutlet and some of the steaming-hot mashed potatoes; but there were early pease as well, and likewise there was a dish of asparagus with stems not as thick as a slate-pencil.

"What dreadful extravagance!" said she, shaking her head. "I cannot permit this to go on, Dodo; I cannot really."

"I tell you, Nan," he said, with a certain stubbornness, "that you must break away from those vicarage traditions. No doubt it was very simple and wholesome fare for a young girl, and I did not like to interfere when I saw you took nothing but water with your meals; but now you are a woman, and the mistress of a house, and—and you must have some wine, Nan, however little. That is Burgundy in the decanter—very soft and nice; and the other decanter is sherry—it is old and dry and quite harmless; and this is hock—Marcobrunner of '71—I know you will like the perfume of it when it is poured into your glass. Besides there's some light sillery, if you would prefer that, only I thought you would have that for dinner."

"Oh, Dodo, how you spoil me!" she said. And then she added, with a sigh of resignation, "But it has been like that all my life long—ever since I can remember."

So they proceeded with their luncheon; and when it was over, she went into the hall and rummaged in the pockets of his overcoat until she found his pipe and tobacco-pouch, and these she brought and put on the table beside him. But he did not take them up.

"By-and-by, Nan," he said, in an evasive way. "I shall be going out for a stroll presently, through the plantation."

“And so this is not to be a Bristol day after all !” she said, reproachfully. “What was there more memorable about a Bristol day than the smell of tobacco—nothing of that kind known at the vicarage, you may be sure ; and I was looking forward to having this house so saturated with the scent of tobacco that whenever I came out of my room in the morning I should at once say to myself, ‘Ah, this is going to be another Bristol day !’ Come, to please me, Dodo !”

He took up the tobacco-pouch and filled his pipe ; she brought him a lighted taper ; and they both drew their chairs in towards the fire.

“You see, Dodo,” she continued, “you can go for your stroll afterwards, while I have my interview with the cook and the housemaid, to find out about the tradesmen’s pass-books, and a number of things like that. I must have my code of laws and regulations, you know, just as Mrs. Honeyman has : she showed me all how it was arranged. And then about half-past four, if you care to come in for a cup of tea, I should like to go out for a little walk with you, in the twilight, when you hear the thrushes best.”

Later on that evening those two were again seated before the fire—he at the table, where there was some whiskey and water as an accompaniment to his pipe ; she at his feet, shading her face with the book from which she had been reading to him. Now, however, they had fallen into some discussion of the events of the day.

“And remember it is only an experiment, Nan,” he said, with a return of that timid solicitude which had marked his demeanour in the morning. “I don’t bind you to anything. We could try some other place—some other way. You are young ; and perhaps I don’t quite know what you would like. We could go away elsewhere, Nan. You may find it too lonely, after all.”

“Ah, Dodo, Dodo, don’t talk like that !” she said. And then she leant her arm and her cheek affectionately on

his knee, so that the firelight and the lamp-light played hide-and-seek among the tags and curls of sun-brown hair that strayed about her small ear. "It seems far too beautiful and wonderful to be real. And I never did think such happiness would come true ; but it has, hasn't it, Dodo ? At last !—at last !"

CHAPTER III.

A CHANCE ENCOUNTER.

CLAD in abundant furs, the Lady Helen Yorke was standing on the steps of Monks-Hatton Hall, leisurely buttoning her driving-gloves ; and in front of her and awaiting her was a mail phaeton, with a pair of handsome grays more or less submitting to the pacific ministrations of the groom at their head. Her companion was of maturer age than herself—a lady of quiet and serious aspect, who rarely spoke unless when she was spoken to. On the other hand, when these two had at length got into their places, when the younger of them had taken possession of reins and whip, and when a touch of the silk had sent the horses forward, it speedily appeared that Lady Helen was in a particularly gay and talkative mood, though, as usual, her eyes maintained a certain mysterious reticence in their expression of humour or sarcasm, as the case might be.

"You are so dark and secret, Mrs. Spink," she was saying, as the carriage rolled along the Fair Mile. "Spink by name, but Sphinx by nature. One can never tell what you are brooding over. I can only guess now, for example, what you are thinking of my having dragged you away at this unearthly hour, when I might have taken Willis with me. But then, you see, Mrs. Spinkie, it's a long drive to Oxford, and the horses will want at least a couple of hours' rest in the middle of the day ; and what could I do with Willis all that time ? What does she know about architecture—about colleges and quadrangles and chapels ?

Never mind. If this is another deadly injury, I dare say you have your revenge. I should not be in the least surprised to discover that you wrote articles for the Sunday Radical papers, denouncing the brutal selfishness and tyranny and hard-heartedness of the British nobility. Oh yes, I dare say we catch it——”

“Of course you are only joking, Lady Helen,” her companion said, in her tranquil and grave fashion; “but if I were capable of any such thing, surely it would be a piece of the worst ingratitude. Ever since I came to Monks-Hatton I have received nothing but kindness; nothing could equal her ladyship’s thoughtfulness and consideration——”

“Oh yes,” broke in the other, in her wilful way. “Mamma is always thoughtful and considerate; it is mamma’s daughter who is selfish and cruel and hard-hearted—dragging poor Mrs. Spinkie away from all her home duties and her home comforts, and driving her through a lonely country on a gloomy March morning. I understand. I can guess how you are plotting out your revenge. Those iniquitous people called the aristocracy will catch it next Sunday or the Sunday after. Well, well!”

But whatever the taciturn or discreet Mrs. Spink may have been thinking, she could hardly have resented being called away from constant attendance on even the most considerate of invalids to join in this impromptu excursion. The morning was overclouded, it is true, but yet it was beautiful in a way; and the landscape was an English-looking landscape of early spring—of soft greens and purple-grays mainly; a glimpse of a red-tiled farm-building here and there; a pond struck into a shimmer of silver by the wind; the beech woods carpeted with the bronze and copper leaves of the previous autumn. Then, by-and-by, they got up on to very high land—for the drive between Henley and Oxford is one of the pleasantest in England; and from the lofty highway running between strips of heath and common they had spacious views over the wide

champaign country, with the variegated pastures and homesteads and leafless woods gradually ascending towards a line of hill that sloped away to the west. The air was quite mild and soft for the beginning of March. And here was a companion in the gayest of good-humours; surely there was nothing to complain of?—nor, in truth, did Mrs. Spink appear to complain.

Then at last there appeared before them a vision of ghostly gray spires and towers rising above a vague wilderness of elms and pollard willows, with a distant white glint of water; and presently they were driving over Magdalen Bridge and past the Botanic Gardens, and so into the midst of the High Street. The younger of these two ladies, who had now grown silent, wore a serenely impassive air; she seemed to be chiefly occupied with her horses, as was natural; but her eyes were alert, and it may be presumed that there were few objects in this famous thoroughfare that escaped her covert scrutiny as she made her way along. They stopped at the Mitre. The charge of the phaeton was resigned to the groom, who departed to the stables. And then the travellers entered the hotel.

But when Lady Helen came out again she had undergone a transformation. On this mild morning the unnecessary furs had been discarded; and now she appeared in a walking dress, chiefly of black, with blue sleeves, and a broad band of blue round the base of the skirt; her hat was also of blue and black, with a single feather of bright golden yellow; her hands were encased in a slung muff of black-dyed beaver. It was a costume perhaps a little more suggestive of some fashionable watering-place than appropriate to the staid streets of an ancient town; and yet it was quiet enough and in good taste; while there was in the carriage of the wearer of it a certain repose and dignity that seemed to remove from her any suspicion of trying to produce effect. For a second, as she thus came out into the daylight, she appeared undecided as to which way to turn. Her eyes—those beautiful clear gray eyes, with their

black lashes—looked conscious ; and her first half-concealed glance along the dull pavements was almost apprehensive. That was but for a moment ; she had an abundance of self-command.

“And where would you like to go now, Mrs. Spink ?” she said, with much cheerfulness. “You have never been to Oxford before ? Well, the river ought to be lively just now, in view of the boat-race, you know. Shall we go down to Folly Bridge ?—and you might have a look in at Christ Church on the way.”

“But, Lady Helen,” said her companion, with some astonishment, “I thought you had come on some errand—that you had some architectural matters to study——”

“Yes, yes,” she made answer, impatiently. “But I have forgotten the book. I had a book marked. We’d better just walk about and look at the place. Oxford is always interesting ; any part of it is interesting. Besides, we shall have to have lunch by-and-by. It is hardly worth while going away down to the river : who wants to see a lot of boys splashing about ?”

Mrs. Spink was the most pliant of companions ; she professed her readiness for anything ; and so the two ladies set out, going along the High Street by the way they had come. It must be confessed, however, that Lady Helen proved herself a most indifferent cicerone. At first, it is true, she was in high spirits, and was inclined to continue that badgering of poor Mrs. Spinkie with which she had started in the morning ; but gradually she became more and more preoccupied ; while, despite all her concealment, it was clear that she was furtively glancing along the gray pavements from time to time, and that with an ever-increasing disinclination to talk. Mrs. Spink received little information. Nay, their wanderings in this direction extended no further than Queen’s. Here Lady Helen turned, on some excuse or other ; and when they had repassed All Souls’ and regained the region of the shops, she hung about the windows, affecting to be deeply interested in their contents.

It was an odd way of studying the architectural beauties of Oxford, or of introducing a stranger to the chief features of the town. Shop windows in which were straw hats and gay neckerchiefs ; in which were clocks and watches and ornamented alarums ; in which were apples and oranges and early rhubarb—these seemed all alike capable of arresting her attention ; while she even stood and gazed, or appeared to be gazing, at a fishmonger's slab, with its salmon and eels and cod. As the time went by in this fruitless and fatiguing fashion, she seemed to grow more taciturn and discontented ; indeed, her answers to any haphazard remark her companion ventured to offer were distinctly sharp and short ; and it almost seemed as if the fleeting expression of disappointment that occasionally crossed her features were about to settle down into absolute ill temper. And then again, and without a word of explanation or excuse, she set out to retrace her steps along the High Street, secretly watching, perhaps, and yet with an air as if she would defy any one—Mrs. Spink or another—to say there was any occult quest in her thoughts. She pretended to be carelessly observant of whatever she encountered—an undergraduate with his gown tucked over his arm, a butcher's boy facing a yelping terrier, a heavily laden wain lumbering along the middle of the street. But when she had once more reached the entrance to All Souls', she hesitatingly paused at the small wooden portal, and glanced inwards at the damp green grass of the quadrangle, at the cloisterlike and crumbling walls, and the small and sombre windows.

"There is a gateway in there," she said, with a certain cold indifference, "that has a roof with fan tracery. I should like to have seen it."

"Shall we go in, then ?" Mrs. Spink said at once.

"I don't know whether the chapel is open," she said—and still she lingered in a sort of sullen indecision. "If Mr. Hume—of course you remember Mr. Hume—if he were here he could tell us. Mr. Hume is a Fellow of All Souls'."

"Then let us go inside and ask for him," said Mrs. Spink, naturally enough.

But the effect produced by this casual suggestion was startling: Lady Helen's eyes flashed, and her face crimsoned.

"What do you mean?" she demanded. "Do you suppose—or would you have any one suppose—that I came to Oxford to call on Mr. Hume? That would be a pretty story to tell! We are going back to the hotel—and at once." And not another word did this submissive attendant receive as these two returned to the Mitre; while as for Lady Helen, she seemed so vexed and angry (for some reason or another) that she appeared to have definitely abandoned that furtive scanning of distant passers-by.

On their arrival at the hotel a waiter who happened to be coming through the passage opened the door of the coffee-room for them; and Lady Helen entered, and, with never a glance around, walked straight up to the window which looks into the High Street. Her companion was less confident, or less self-absorbed.

"Don't you think, Lady Helen," she said, in an undertone, "that your mamma would prefer your having lunch in a private room?"

"Oh, I don't want any lunch!" she made answer, impatiently—and she remained standing and looking out. "Order what you like for yourself."

And indeed this was not at the moment much of a public place; there were only two other persons in the room, and these were at separate tables; one of them a stout country-looking clergyman devoting himself to a Gorgonzola cheese, the other a young man deep in the columns of a sporting newspaper. Mrs. Spink, left to her own devices, secured a small table close by where Lady Helen was standing, and proceeded to order luncheon for two—perhaps that wilful young personage might be induced to change her mind. And Mrs. Spink saw no reason why she herself should be deprived of her mid-day meal. They had been driving for

about three hours ; for well over another hour they had been wearily pacing up and down the High Street pavements ; in her case, at all events, the vagus nerve had begun to sound its warning little bell.

But of a sudden all this was changed.

"Mrs. Spink !" exclaimed Lady Helen, in a low and hurried voice.

The elder woman looked up. There was some one coming along outside ; and although a screen of wire gauze intervened, she easily recognised who that was ; it was Mr. Sidney Hume. But what was to be done—assuming that Lady Helen wished to intercept and speak with this son of her particular friend ? In another instant he would be past ; and she, Mrs. Spink, could not be expected to run away down the High Street of Oxford after him. But it was Lady Helen herself who proved herself mistress of this occasion. The moment she had caught sight of him she had—in her eagerness and headlong forgetfulness of strangers—rapped smartly on the screen of wire gauze stretching across the window ; but that was of no avail to attract his attention, for the screen struck the wooden frame-work, not the glass, and no sound was carried outward. Then for a second she stood irresolute, with some desperate thought of appealing to the waiter ; but she now perceived that Sidney Hume was crossing the thoroughfare to talk to an elderly gentleman in cap and gown who appeared to be waiting for him at the corner of the lane. She hesitated no longer.

"Mrs. Spink," she said, quickly, "Mr. Hume is over the way. Wouldn't it interest Mrs. Hume to know that I had seen and spoken with her precious boy ? Stay where you are. Perhaps he will come and have lunch with us."

And therewith, and calmly and sedately, and without any appearance of haste, she left the coffee-room, emerged into the outer daylight, and watching her opportunity between the passing cabs, crossed the thoroughfare. The elderly

gentleman—when Sidney Hume saw who this was who now approached—was very speedily dismissed.

“I made sure I should meet some one I knew,” she observed to him, placidly, when he had expressed his surprise and pleasure. “I told Mrs. Spink as we were driving along this morning that I knew several lads who were at Oxford—men, I suppose they call themselves up here—though one forgets the name of their college when one isn’t interested. There is my cousin Cyril Leslie, at Brasenose; I thought I might by some accident run against him, though it would have been a matter of little consequence. But it is different meeting with you; for Mrs. Hume will be so pleased to hear that I saw you and had a chat with you. I hope you can come and have some luncheon with us over at the hotel there.”

“Oh, no, no,” he said, laughing. “I cannot afford to throw away such a chance. Mrs. Spink and you must come along and have lunch with me in my rooms; the entertainment of visitors is rather a rare joy at present—it is not to be forfeited. All Souls’ is quite close by; and I can show you the college silver while something is being got ready for you. What do you say?—will you be so kind?—shall we go over and capture Mrs. Spink?”

She was highly pleased by this friendliness; for, so far as she had observed, Sidney Hume had never shown much desire for the society of women-folk. Yet, as this tall young man piloted her across the thoroughfare, with a profound disregard of any urgent hansom; and as he brought his power of persuasion to bear on Mrs. Spink, who was glad to think of having luncheon anywhere; and as he conducted the two ladies along to All Souls’, and showed them over the college, and finally had them installed in his own rooms, nothing could exceed his courtesy and modest kindness. She remembered a saying of Mrs. Hume’s, “When you get a Scotch boy well mannered, he is very well mannered indeed.” And this handsome lad, though his blood was but partly Scotch, had

received his training from that Scotch mother, who was extremely proud of her name and lineage, and solicitous above all things that her sons and daughters should have a bearing worthy of their descent. As for his good looks—But here Lady Helen found herself unaccountably shy. As he moved about the room, bringing his two guests (while luncheon was being prepared for them) such small curiosities of his own as he thought might interest them—an illuminated manuscript on vellum, a Trautz-Bauzonnet binding, a rare Elzevir—her glances could only follow him in a veiled and covert fashion. She found herself, too, when he regarded her, a little disconcerted. His eyes, grave and serious, had a curious directness in their look. They seemed to say: “Let us have done with conventionalism, with pretence. Affectation is tedious, a mere waste of time. Let us establish a simpler, a more reasonable, relationship than that.” And yet, serious and attentive and respectful as his eyes were, they could lighten up at times when she was inclined to be merry; while his laugh was quite boyish. Beautiful eyes, she thought. And his hair was beautiful, so soft and smooth in its rich brown tones. As for his features, they were striking and interesting rather than strictly regular; but were they not somewhat pale for one who was fond of athletic exercises, who had taken prizes for running and high jumping; and who (according to a certain fond mamma) was one of the most distinguished members of the University Fencing Club? Of fine physique he was, most clearly; shoulders square, back flat, muscles firm and clean, while his upright figure and the fine set of his head were such as might have been expected (as Lady Helen thought) of one of “the handsome Humes.”

Mrs. Spink began to fear that luncheon would never arrive; but it did; and while the little festivity was going forward, Lady Helen took occasion to bewail her sad and solitary lot, to young Hume’s intense astonishment. For he had always heard of her as living a most gay and fashionable life; and he had himself, in the autumn, met

her at country houses, where she was the reigning belle ; and he had seen her photograph in the shop windows as one of the leaders of the London throng. But no ; it appeared that was all a mistake, a misconception.

“Mamma,” said this plaintive damsel, appealing for sympathy, “never even tries to go out now, as Mrs. Spink knows to her cost ; if, on rare occasions, she can be induced to go into the garden in a Bath chair, that is about the most. As for papa, he hates the very name of London ; his sole concern is with horses and dogs, and guns and fishing-rods ; and it seems as if Providence had mysteriously arranged that if you care for nothing but hunting and fishing and shooting, you can keep yourself fully occupied from year’s end to year’s end. If it weren’t for the good-natured charity of friends and relatives, I should forget how to find my way into the Park. What is the use of having a house in Upper Brook Street when it is let every season ? But now I have a great scheme, a splendid scheme, in my mind,” she went on, with a sprightlier air. “What do you think of it, Mr. Hume ? If I were to coax papa into not letting the Upper Brook Street house for this next season, do you think Mrs. Hume would come up to town and be my guest ? I fancy it might be very pleasant for both of us—she and I are such good friends and companions ; and I would not lead her too giddy a dance in the way of going out ; while she could help me to entertain a little—the best of chaperons. What do you think of it ? I am sure I can persuade papa—if only your mother will consent.”

She seemed greatly captivated by this project of hers, and talked of it all through luncheon ; while he could only say that she was very kind, and that he had no doubt his mother would gladly accept. Then, luncheon over, he was for taking his guests out to show them some of the sights of Oxford, more especially as Mrs. Spink was a stranger to the town ; but Lady Helen objected ; she was very well where she was ; she was interested in these rooms and in his occupations ; she was sure he had not shown them half

his treasures ; had he no more of those manuscripts in gold and sumptuous colour ?

Well, he was nothing loth, though he was rather given to belittling his amateur collections and apologising for a series of useless hobbies. However, on the chance of interesting her, he went and brought a casket—a plain rosewood casket containing a series of drawers ; and these drawers, on being opened, displayed a most heterogeneous assortment of last-century engraved stones and seals, coats of arms, masonic emblems, copies of antique gems, and what not, with one or two signed Pichlers. But, the better to make out these heraldic devices and minute inscriptions, she proposed he should carry the case to a small table at the window ; and thither he went, she following ; while Mrs. Spink, satisfied with her easy-chair and a portfolio of engravings of old Oxford, remained behind. Those two tall young people at the window had their heads pretty close together, and of necessity their fingers were continually coming in contact as each successive sard and blood-stone and agate was offered and returned.

“ But what is this ? ” said she, on one of the drawers being opened ; and she took up a small gold ornament.

“ Oh, that has got in there by mistake,” he said, carelessly. “ That is a copy of the little bell that Roman ladies wore as a charm against the evil eye.”

“ Really ! How very interesting ! And the inscription ? ”

“ The inscription is in Greek. It means ‘ I was made to guard against witchcraft.’ ”

She seemed quite fascinated by this little gold trinket ; she lingered over it ; she would look at nothing else, until he said :

“ If it were an original one, Lady Helen, I would ask you to accept it. But it is only a fac-simile.”

“ What difference does that make ? ” she said, with promptitude. “ Do you really give it to me ? ”

“ If you will be so kind as to take it,” he said, in rather an off-hand way. It was not a valuable gift,

For the briefest second she thanked him with grateful eyes ; then she looked down, and said, in a low clear voice : “ Yes, I will take it—and wear it—on one condition : that you wear something I shall send you in return, as a souvenir of an unexpected meeting and a very happy hour—to me, at least.” And therewithal, before he could answer or make any promise or protest, she had gone quickly away to Mrs. Spink, and in her ordinary voice was explaining the marvellous interest attaching to this pretty charm, and declaring her resolve to wear it night and day all the years of her life as a safeguard against the machinations and evil enterprises of the powers of darkness.

And very merry, and capricious, and whimsical was she during the long drive home ; and Mrs. Spink was no longer Mrs. Spink, nor even Mrs. Spinkie, but “ my dear Spinkie ” ; and she was being treated to a tolerable amount of good-humoured raillery by this young lady with the inscrutably mischievous eyes—raillery which she bore with her accustomed patience, for, on the whole, the Monks-Hatton family were exceedingly kind to her, and she was in a dependent position, and had to be discreet.

“ And don’t you think it is a noble scheme, my Spinkie,” Lady Helen continued, as they drove on by Nuneham and Dorchester and Shillingford—“ a perfectly splendid scheme—to have a mother in town as well as one in the country ? If I can get it to work, that is. If I can get Mrs. Hume to consent, I think I can manage papa.”

“ Why, you know, Lady Helen, you always have your own way in everything, and with everybody,” said Mrs. Spink.

“ Oh ! oh ! what is that ? ” the younger lady retorted. “ More tyranny ? More turning of the worm ? I should not be at all surprised, my dear but dark Mrs. Spinkie, that you were in secret league with the Nihilists. Some day or other we shall find a bomb on the front steps at Monks-Hatton, and that will be having it out with us with a vengeance ! And isn’t it another piece of monstrous cruelty

that I should be going up to all the gaieties of town while you are left to mope and pine in the country ? ”

“ I am sure of this, Lady Helen,” Mrs. Spink interposed, with some little spirit, “ that no one is to be pitied who is allowed to spend the summer at Henley.”

“ Oh, if you take it that way,” the younger lady said. “ Drooping laburnums—and honeysuckle—and wild roses in the hedges. All very nice. — For my part, I prefer the flowers you find on the side of a great staircase, when you are going up, and when you are listening to the music above. Or in a conservatory, if you are sitting out a dance. Or at the Botanic Society’s Fêtes. Oh yes, the Botanic Society’s Fêtes are delightful. But about the great project, my dear Spinkie. Don’t you think Mrs. Hume will make an admirable chaperon ? You see, her own family have all married into the very best sets. No wonder. The handsome Hays and the handsome Humes. Don’t you think they have a name and a history just as proud as any ? Have you ever heard the prophecy,

*‘ Whate’er hath end, whate’er begins,
There’ll aye be Hays while Teviot rins’ ?*

That was Thomas the Rhymer in the thirteenth century. I’m afraid he was a wicked old gentlemen, and in league with the devil ; but I can repeat any witchcraft verses with impunity, so long as I am wearing the talisman that is to protect me from all possible harm. Come, now, my dear Spinkie, wake up, and tell me if you can imagine a more distinguished figure than Mrs. Hume will present at the head of the table in Upper Brook Street. The head ? Why, of course. I am going to pretend to be a young woman for a year or two longer. Other folks can be as dark and silent as yourself, you know, when there is occasion. And one’s age is not a matter that concerns anybody except one’s enemies.”

But when they were nearing Henley, Lady Helen’s mood changed somewhat.

"You must explain to mamma, Mrs. Spink," said she, "how we came to run against Mr. Hume—the most unexpected thing that could have happened. Of course it was very lucky, for I particularly wanted to see that vaulted roof, and the reredos in the chapel. But if we drive there again I will take care not to forget the book that I have marked."

Mrs. Spink—or Spinkie—did not answer : she was an observant woman, but not communicative.

CHAPTER IV.

A VISITOR.

NAN SUMMERS and her father were seated at the breakfast table. And a very pretty breakfast table it was ; everything bright and fresh and clear, with bowls and glasses of wall-flower and daffodils and jonquils, placed there by the youthful house-mistress herself. The sunlight, unchecked by any complicity of curtains, fell on the white cloth, and shed a soft glory around that lit up the wild-rose tints of her happy young face and shone in her smiling and contented eyes.

"Nan," said her father, "I found another thrush's nest for you this morning ; but I don't know how many eggs, for she sat still, looking at me, and so I came away."

"Ah, Dodo," said Nan, "that reminds me. I have been hearing about you and your frightful extravagance. Old John has told me. Now I understand why there are so many singing-birds about this place, piping away from the earliest hour in the morning. I have heard of the chopped meat, and the marrow-bones, and crumbs, and half-loaves scattered about every time you came here while the house was being got ready."

"Well, you see, Nan," said he, with some air of apology, "I knew you did not like the idea of caged birds. I heard you say so once. And I thought I might coax the wild ones to come about, so that they would nest here ; and a

few scraps don't run to much. But I think you ought to have some pets in-doors, Nan. I must see about that; companions for you, to keep you amused. What do you say to a King Charles spaniel, now? And I know where I can get you a Russian cat—a splendid fellow, like a young bear. And what about some tame rabbits? or guinea-pigs?"

"There's one thing I wonder you haven't got for me, Dodo," said she, "considering all the care you take of me—as if I were worth it. I wonder you haven't got a bull-dog to watch outside the house at night."

He looked up. "A bull-dog?" he said, quietly. "I am going to be your bull-dog, Nan. I rather like the job. Many's the time, when I was down at Bristol, I walked over to the vicarage after you were all asleep; and I used to think, 'Well, now, if any enterprising cracksman has it in his mind to break into this house and frighten Nan, I wish he'd just happen to choose this particular night for it.'"

She burst out laughing. "Oh, what a shame! The poor man—the poor wretch trying to earn a dishonest living—and all of a sudden he thinks the Evil One has got him by the throat. Do you consider that playing fair, Dodo?"

"I think you may trust to me to be your bull-dog, Nan," he said, in the same quiet way. And then he added, "Well, now, if you have finished, you'd better put on your hat and jacket, and bring me my pipe, and we'll go out and see how old John is getting on with his pansy beds."

But when she rejoined him in the garden she found that he had not gone near old John; he was by himself, slowly pacing up and down one of the paths, his head bent, his face grave.

"There's something I have put off telling you, Nan," said he, rather uneasily. "The fact is, we are going to have a visitor this afternoon."

"Yes?" said she, with cheerful promptitude.

"I would rather have avoided it if I could well have done so," he continued. "You see, it's this way, Nan: I want

you to have a fair and clear start. I would rather you did not meet any of my former acquaintances——”

“But why, Dodo?” said she. “If they were good enough for you to know, they are good enough for me.”

“It’s different ; it’s different ; you don’t understand,” he answered her, almost impatiently. “I want you to have a fair and clear start. I want you to make your own friends and acquaintances.”

“But I don’t want any friends and acquaintances,” she exclaimed. “I can’t be bothered with them. I am too much occupied, and too happy, all day long. Why, when I drive in to Henley in the morning, I get my shopping over just in time to bring you back for lunch. And then in the afternoon I have to help old John with his seeds and labels—his petunias, and lobelias, and centaureas, and so on. And as for the evening, do you think I want any stranger to come in while you are having your pipe and I am reading to you before the fire? That is a very likely thing !”

“Ah, but inevitably you will form friends and acquaintances, Nan,” he said to her. “You cannot help it ; and you need not seek to help it ; all I say is, they must be of your own choosing, and your own ways of thinking and upbringing. As for myself, I don’t want to play the part of mystery man. I don’t want to conceal what I have been——”

“I should think not !” she exclaimed again.

“But there is no use in flaunting things in people’s faces, and challenging prejudices,” he continued, in a very reasonable tone. “If I want the past to be the past, it is for your sake, Nan. I want you to start fair and clear. And I want you to remember this, too—it is but natural for people to have prejudices ; and they don’t reflect that a human being cannot always be what he would like to be. It is very easy to say, ‘Oh, how shocking of you to have earned your living in such a way, and in such company !’ but they forget that

perhaps you never had any other chance. And so, if any one should ever say anything against me to you, Nan——”

“Anything—against—you—to me?” she interposed, with a proud trembling of the lips. “I think the answer would be ready!”

“Ah, but, as I say, people have their prejudices,” he remonstrated with her, gently. “And that is what I would ask you to remember—that perhaps one might have chosen another way of life if one had had the chance. But the great bulk of us are born poor; and we have to accept the circumstances and the companions we find around us; and we have to earn our bread by any means that is handy——”

“In order to throw it away on thrushes and linnets!” she said, laughing. She would have no more of these excuses and palliations. She was of a robust faith. “Tell me, Dodo,” she went on, abruptly changing the subject, “who is your visitor who is coming this afternoon?”

“He is a good enough sort of young fellow—in his own way, that is,” he answered her; “though your friends at the vicarage might consider him just a little bit—a little bit—— But I don’t know. He is good-natured—amiable—a jovial kind of a chap. Oh, I’ve seen Dick Erridge get on very well with strangers. He is the son of the people who have the Golden Swan Hotel at Richmond; and very well off they are; but he doesn’t squander—not a bit; he’s shrewd; gets value for his money; he can look after himself. Really, he’s not at all a bad sort of young fellow, if you make allowances——”

“Will he stay to dinner?” asked the practical young house-mistress.

“No, no,” he replied at once. “He will not trouble you, Nan; he must not be allowed to trouble you. Indeed, I did not want him to come at all; but I could not very well shake him off; and—and if you don’t mind being just a little bit civil to him—after all, he’s a good-natured sort of chap——”

"If I don't mind being civil to him?" she repeated. "To the first friend of yours who has taken the trouble to come and call on you in your new home? Well, we'll see about that!"

It was about four o'clock in the afternoon that the front gate was thrown open by a groom, and presently a very tall dog-cart, drawn by two chestnut cobs tandem, was carefully piloted along the semicircular drive until it was drawn up at the door of the house. The young man who now descended from this lofty vehicle was not himself of an imposing appearance, except, perhaps, as to his costume, which was of an extremely horsey character; he wore a large and loose buff-coloured overcoat with big horn buttons; while his rigid collar, his elaborate tie, and his resplendently polished and pointed boots were worthy of attention. And yet this Dick Erridge was not all clothes. He had something to say for himself; nay, as he followed Mr. Summers into the little drawing-room, he showed a chirpy, jerky self-possession not to be despised; and when he was introduced to Miss Anne, he greeted her with a quick, decisive bow.

"Glad to make your acquaintance, Miss Summers," he said. "I have seen your photograph more than once; but there are some people the photographer never does justice to—not to be expected."

He was a short, dumpy little man, with a clean-shaven face, and with an odd irregularity of expression about his mouth that might have given him a chance of becoming a comic actor; his eyes alert and intelligent enough; his look distinctly good-humoured; while, as speedily appeared, in spite of his tricks and airs of assurance and self-assertion, his attitude towards Mr. Summers was one of slavish worship. That was what Nan wanted to learn, first of all. When she heard the stranger arrive, she had said in her heart, "Now show me how you treat my father, and then I shall know how to treat you." But this dapper little person, notwithstanding his nonchalance and cheerful effrontery, seemed absolutely to grovel before her father, so

excessive was his admiration. She said, inwardly, "You're not very good to look at, and you're over-dressed, and you needn't keep your elbows stuck out in that way, but you must stay to dinner."

"You haven't driven all the way from Richmond this morning?" Mr. Summers asked of his guest.

"Oh dear no," answered the gentleman in the wide coat and the tight gaiters and the painfully pointed boots. "I stopped last night at Slough, with some bachelor friends." He grinned in grateful remembrance. "They did me well, I assure you—uncommon well: Bollinger of '84; green chartreuse fit for a prince; Bock's gold-foil cigars; and Nap. till two o'clock this morning; all very fine and large."

"Would you like some tea, Mr. Erridge?" said the young hostess.

"No, thanks," he responded, in his blithe and off-hand way. "I've only come to have a look over the new diggins; and then I'm o-u-g-h, off. Sha'n't disturb you. But I've brought you a little present, Mr. Summers, that I think will be of use to you. If you don't mind, I'll go and see if my man has fetched it in; and if you could get me a brad-awl and a screw-driver, I'll show you how to work the oracle. We can fix it up in the twinkling of a bedpost."

Nan was left alone in the room. Then she began to hear strange noises in the hall—the prising open of wood, the clanking of metal, and so on; and presently these noises retreated to the passage leading through to the back premises. By-and-by her curiosity overcame her; she went out to see what was going on; and then she found that Mr. Dick Erridge and his groom had between them succeeded in fixing up against the wall a tall and narrow piece of mechanism, apparently in steel and bronze, with cords, pulleys, handles, and weights. Mr. Summers was standing by, with an odd, half-ashamed, deprecatory look on his face.

"What's the good, man, what's the good?" he was saying.

But Dick Erridge was seriously in earnest; and the moment he saw Nan approach he appealed to her for assistance.

"Look here, Miss Summers," he cried; "I want you to come and help me to convince your father. I say it is a shame that any one should have such splendid strength, and not keep himself well up to the mark. And here is the very thing—quite handy—no labour—a few minutes now and again——"

By this time Nan had drawn near. "What is it, then?" she asked, regarding this upright instrument.

"Oh, they call it a chest-expander, or a chest-machine; but that's all bosh, for it exercises all the muscles of the body, though no doubt the chest and arms in greater measure. And I say your father should keep himself in good fettle——"

"My father must not take any violent exercise," said Nan Summers, gravely.

"Violent?" said the young man, almost vehemently. "There is no violence! That is the beauty of it; there is no wrenching, as with Indian clubs or dumb-bells. And you can have just what weight to pull against that you like; you can have the exercise as gentle as ever you please. See here!"

In the zeal of his proselytism he pulled off his overcoat and threw it to his man; he stooped down and removed some of the weights; he got up, took hold of the two handles, stepped back a space, and began vigorously to box the air between him and the wall, while the weights slid easily up and down the metal grooves. Then he turned his back to the wall, and again pounded the air in front of him, and shot out his arms sideways, and hauled at the ropes from over his head, and jerked them out from his elbows, and went through all kinds of diverse movements, until he suddenly released the handles, which went rattling back to the machine.

"Do you see that, now?—work for a child!" he ex-

claimed, though he was himself puffing and blowing, and laboriously trying to conceal the same.

"But what's the object?" Nan's father said, with a good-natured smile. "What's the use of going into training for no end?"

"For no end?" Dick Erridge repeated, indignantly. "I say that a man with a splendid build like yours, with such splendid strength, should keep it up for its own sake. You should be proud of it for its own sake. It is a possession, a wonderful possession. What a fine thing it must be to go about with the consciousness that you are the master, that you have the power, that you can always get elbow-room for yourself in a crowd, and that if there's a row raised you can make it kingdom come for any rough who is juggins enough to bump up against you! Is that nothing? There are some men think a heap of a pot o' money; and there's others think no end of a lump of land; but for my part I'd as lief have something I could carry about with me—something a part of myself—something that would enable me to hold my own if there was need. It's *nemo me—nemo me imp*—ah, well. I tell you this, Miss Summers," he continued, and in his eagerness and enthusiasm he left the Latin phrase behind: it was really a beautiful eagerness and enthusiasm—in Homeric times it would have soared and found expression in long-rolling hexameters. "If your father had any ambition that way, and if he went into training for it, I believe he could claim to be the strongest man in England—apart from the professionals at the halls, of course, and they're only one or two. Why," said he, and he went forward and gripped Mr. Summers between the elbow and shoulder, "there's muscle for you! There's an arm! I shouldn't like to be the Johnny that got that sledge-hammer on to the top of his little cocoanut. And yet I'll be bound he never practises with anything. I'll take my davy there isn't a dumb-bell in the house——"

Nan's father moved away, with a bit of a quiet laugh. "My good fellow," he said, "I don't want to send any of

my fellow-creatures to kingdom come, even if I were able." And then he turned to Nan. "What do you say, Nan? Shall we show Mr. Erridge round the garden now? Run away and put something about your head, and then you can come out and tell him all the fine things we are looking forward to."

Now when Nan went quickly away to fetch her hat, her first hasty impressions of this stranger were of a distinctly mixed character. In respect of his profound and declared admiration of her father (she might have said) she liked him well; but in respect of himself he was naught. And she might have added, in the phraseology of the philosopher, that in respect of his disposition, it appeared to be a very good and amiable disposition, but in respect of his manner, 'twas a very vile manner. It certainly was not the manner of the folk whom she had been accustomed to meet at the vicarage. Even his accent seemed alien and strange. But everything was outweighed by this attitude of his towards her father. In the brief time that she was absent she had resolved to be as civil and kind to this visitor as she knew how to be. She would think only of his good points, and shut her eyes to others that did not quite so commend themselves. Was not this the first of her father's friends who had taken the trouble to come and see him?

When she went out again she found the two of them in confabulation with the old Scotch gardener, who was discoursing learnedly about early pease, asparagus beds, and what not; and she waited, listening to the universal calling and trilling of the blackbirds and thrushes and linnets, and to the more distant kurrooing of the wood-pigeons from among the lofty beeches, that were now gathering about them the silence of the evening and a premonition of the dusk. But presently she interposed, and said,

"Mr. Erridge, you can't be driving back to Richmond to-night?"

"Oh, not at all," said he. "Only down to Henley—the Red Lion—they treat me well there. I feel like a lord

when I have the corner sitting-room, with the Charles I. coat of arms in it, all to myself."

"But won't you stay and dine with us?" she made bold to say, to her father's astonishment. "You won't find it dark to-night driving in to Henley. There will be moonlight—nearly a full moon—and once you have made your way down to the Oxford road, it will be all quite clear and simple."

"I shall be most happy," he answered, with gallant promptitude. "Suit me to a turn, if I'm not putting you out in any way."

"It may be only a chop, or something of that kind, you know, Dick," Mr. Summers said, intervening to save Nan from any responsibility or danger of failure. "We're hardly settled down here yet. But you won't mind."

"The best of everything is good enough for me," said the young man, with airy confidence. "And the best of everything is a chop with an old friend."

And therewithal Nan sped swiftly away, to hold earnest converse with the cook. It was a rash experiment, perhaps; and this was the first of her father's friends who had come to the house. But the young man looked amiable and tolerant; and, besides, she had a kind of notion that whatever happened, and in whatever chance fashion he was treated, the sitting at her father's table would be for him quite a sufficient pleasure and honour and glory.

And, as it turned out, the little dinner was in every way successful, no matter what anxious fears may have possessed the mind of the young hostess; and her father seemed gratified; while, as for their visitor, happy in his self-importance, delighted with his company, and perhaps a little desirous of impressing this remarkably pretty girl, he fairly excelled himself in displays of wit and humour—of their kind. Only once he blundered.

"Of course you will drive over to the Windsor meeting?" he asked, in his gay way, of Nan's father.

"No, no," Mr. Summers said, shortly.

Indeed, Nan had noticed that whenever races or horses were mentioned, her father had made haste to change the subject, and that with something of ill temper.

"Oh, I quite understand that you have retired from active business," the garrulous young man proceeded. "I quite understand that. And no one more pleased than myself that you were able to take such a step—no one more ready to congratulate you. But I thought you might be driving over to the Windsor meeting merely to see some of the lads."

"Why not, father?" Nan interposed, boldly.

The frown on his face deepened, but he would not speak roughly to her. He only repeated a curt "No, no!" and would have turned the talk to something else. But Dick Erridge had already resumed.

"At all events," said he, in his evident desire to please his smiling-eyed young hostess—"at all events, you will take Miss Summers to Sandown for the Grand Military? You must, really. Think of the paddock, rank and fashion, youth and beauty, the pick o' the swell mob—the very thing to interest her."

The dark look on Mr. Summers's face had still further deepened; and yet, impatient and angry as he was, he kept a firm hold over himself.

"I want my daughter," he said, in slow and measured tones, "to form her own circle of friends and acquaintances. And she is not going to begin by attending race-meetings."

The young man instantly perceived that he had blundered. And he was quick and ingenious; in about a minute he had the conversation miles away from Sandown and steeple-chases and all therewith connected. And Nan, who had but rarely beheld that sombre and threatening expression on her father's face, was glad to see it disappear; indeed, her mere presence, with the radiant sunniness of her look, was quite sufficient to dispel it. Soon those three were on the easiest of terms again; and the evening passed quickly by

—all too quickly for the guest, as could be gathered from the evident reluctance with which he rose to bid them adieu.

“I must not keep you up too late, or you’ll never ask me back again,” said he, in his chirpy way, as he went to fetch his coat. “And Miss Summers must not spoil those country roses in her cheeks, though, indeed, she’s not likely to lose them up among these woods. And I’m going to look you up again some day soon, if you will let me.”

The moonlight fell clear and cold on the semicircular path, on the white gate, and on the rhododendron bushes, that threw shadows of intensest blackness on the lawn. The bird world was hushed now. And here was the tall dog-cart, the unnecessary lamps lit, the groom at the leader’s head. Jim Summers (as he was generally called by his associates—his former associates) and Nan came to the door to bid their visitor good-bye.

“The most charming evening I ever spent in my life,” observed the gay young man, as he got up and possessed himself of the reins. “Awf’ly good of you to take me in and do for me in that hospitable way. Ta, ta ! I think on this occasion I will let Jakes walk by the leader’s head until we get down into the Henley road.

*‘For though on pleasure he was bent,
He had a frugal mind.’*

Good-bye, Miss Summers ! Hope I haven’t bored you to death. I will promise never to do so no more.”

And thereupon the two horses, with the groom leading, walked slowly along the drive, the black cortége on the dully silvered road having rather a funereal appearance. Mr. Summers followed to shut the gate ; there was a final farewell called from amongst the darkness of the trees ; and then Nan’s father came back to her. She did not want to go in just yet, the night was so clear and beautiful. She put her hand within his arm ; she would have him go for a little stroll up and down in the perfect and welcome silence.

"Now, Dodo, I'm going to talk seriously to you——" she began, when he interrupted her.

"But first of all, Nan," said he, in rather a timid fashion, "I wish you would tell me what you think of him—of Dick Erridge, you know."

And then she made answer bravely, though perhaps with a little qualm of conscience: "Oh, he is well enough; I like him very well indeed. I was quite glad to have a friend of yours call on you, particularly a friend who seems to have such a warm and honest admiration of you as he has. You must ask him again; I hope he will come often. And on his side I think he appeared to enjoy the evening: didn't you think so too, Dodo?"

He seemed a little relieved; yet he went on, with some touch of anxiety: "He is really a good fellow, is Dick. And that slang of his is all affectation; it is done to amuse you; the least hint—from one like you, Nan—would stop it in a moment. Perhaps he is a trifle blunt and off-hand—it's a way some of the young fellows have—there's not much harm in it. Oh yes, a very good chap is Dick—only—only I was afraid he mightn't be quite your sort, Nan."

"The world is made up of all sorts!" she exclaimed. "And that is just what I was coming to, Dodo. Why should you keep away from any companions of yours on my account? Do you think I consider myself such a superior person? Why shouldn't you bring your old friends and acquaintances here? Why shouldn't you go to the Windsor meeting or to Sandown? I will go with you, if you like; I never saw a horse-race; why shouldn't I see one—and be introduced to any of your friends you might meet? I am so afraid, Dodo, you will find this place dull. It cannot be dull for me so long as you are here, for I have plenty to do, and I am happy all the day long. But for you? And why should you consider me as something to be taken such care of? Why draw such a line? Don't you know that the great saints of the world were never respecters of persons—that they saw the good in every kind

of humanity—that the beggar by the way-side was as much to them as the king on the throne? Don't make me out a superior person, Dodo! You must get all your old acquaintances to come here, just as Mr. Erridge has done, and if they have the same opinion of you that he has, then they sha'n't want for a welcome—from me, at least!”

He patted her hand that lay on his arm. “No, no, Nan,” said he, in a kindly way. “You must begin your own life with everything fair and clear before you. I have not been planning and waiting all these years for nothing. But you need not think that I don't understand you. I understand you very well. There's a great deal of human nature about you, Nan, and a great deal of charity. Yes, as there had need to be, Nan—a great deal of charity and forbearance, when you gave up your friends at the vicarage, and all their pretty and elegant ways, and came to live here with a rough and ignorant fellow like Jim Summers.”

She was silent for a little while; and presently, as he chanced to look, he found, to his dismay, that she was covertly crying.

“You don't intend it, Dodo, but sometimes you are very cruel to me,” she said. And it was a long time before she could be pacified, out here in the white moonlight.

CHAPTER V.

A SQUIRE OF DAMES.

THE following letter was one morning received by a certain Fellow of All Souls' :

“MY DEAR SID,

“*Lilac Lodge, Henley.*

“Truly marvels will never cease. You meet a young and pretty woman, and instead of contemptuously turning aside from her and escaping into the groves of Academe, where those elderly Greek gentlemen talk and talk for ever and ever, you actually condescend to be civil

to her, and insist on her becoming your guest, and send her home entranced with the way in which she has been entertained and amused. I have just heard all the story. And the Roman charm, too ; it was such a pretty idea of yours to give her that ; she went up to London the next day, and has had the most cunning little chain and clasp attached. And do you know what she has got for you ?—*she* won't expatiate on its value, of course, but you will understand—no one better ; and I wonder which of the young men about town wouldn't give the tips of his ears to receive a keepsake from Helen Yorke. It is an ancient Greek ring, in the original setting, with the most beautifully engraved head of Hera, in onyx. It was found in the island of Santa Maura about three years ago ; and I believe the British Museum people were after it ; but they *swithered* about the price ; and the museum that swithers is lost. Pfander of New Bond Street bought it, and indeed had kept it for himself, only Helen seems to have persuaded him to give it up. She generally gets what she wants ; it's a way the dear girl has. But seriously, my dear Sidney, I wish I could see in this pretty little exchange of gifts some indication of something of greater moment—some indication that her erratic fancy showed signs of settling at last. I fear, however, there is no such piece of good fortune in store for you (supposing you to be inclined that way). I foresee what will happen. After having refused I don't know how many offers—out of mere caprice and perversity, I believe—she will end by marrying that wretched Captain Erle, simply because he's always hanging about after her. Of course it's a good enough match, for it is next door to a certainty now that he will succeed to the Kinross title and estates—unless he should providentially break his neck in the meantime in one of those steeple-chases of his ; but if in the end Helen should marry him, I shall be sorry to part with her, for she is really the dearest creature when you have got to understand her ways.

“And now I come to the main purport of my letter. Helen is anxious to spend this next season in London ; but not with relatives or friends ; she would rather occupy that house in Upper Brook Street that they have been in the habit of letting since Lady Monks-Hatton became so much of an invalid. And her father has consented—he always does consent to anything she wants, so long as he is left free to follow his own diversions ; and her proposal is that I should go and spend the season with her as her guest and her chaperon. Well, I am not unwilling. I think I should like it, for Helen and I get on capitally together. But then, you see, we must have a man to look after us and squire us about ; and that man, if I have anything to say to it, shall *not* be Captain Erle. I hate the very sight of him. He is too self-satisfied ; too sure of Helen, you might almost imagine ; I don’t like gentlemen who have an air of throwing the handkerchief. Now, Sidney, when are you going to tear yourself away from your beloved college ? Why shouldn’t you give up your rooms at Easter for good, have your books and things sent here, and come up to town ? A single bedroom at Strong’s Hotel in Bond Street would be all you could want, and that would be but a few minutes’ walk for you, no matter how late we three might care to sit up, after a theatre or a dinner or a dance. Come and see the world you live in. It is full of colour and gaiety and activity ; it isn’t a pale and silent thing, like literature—a cold copy of the life led by other people ever so long ago. If you must have books, what ails you at the London Library ? But I can imagine many a snug and merry little party—the three of us—sitting up after the whirl of the evening has been got over, to discuss all the people and lay plans for the next day ; very snug and nice ; and it is *not* Captain Erle whom I propose to have as the third person of that little group. At the same time, consult your own wishes ; only let me know, for if you would rather decline, then I should refuse Helen’s invitation, and remain at Henley

"Good-night, my dear boy. Philip and Jean are urging me to pay them a visit, but I must see what you have to say first.

"YOUR AFFECTIONATE MOTHER.

"P.S.—Helen expects you to *wear* this ring ; and it will do very well as a scarf-pin if you get some squeezable material like China crape ; a light terra-cotta would look nice."

It was a skilful letter, and eventually it achieved its object ; for, indeed, the young man was at all times an obedient son, and easily influenced by a mother of whom he was exceedingly fond and proud. Perhaps it was with a sigh that he gave up his cherished rooms, and had his belongings transferred to Henley ; and perhaps it was with no eager anticipation that he proceeded to London to become a squire of dames. But there were compensations ; and among these were certainly the snug little gatherings which Mrs. Hume managed to secure when the toil of pleasure had ceased for the evening, and silence had come down over the fashionable world, and when those three, with all their responsibilities thrown aside, could sit idly and merrily talk over the events of the day, until, on occasion, especially as the spring drew on to early summer, it might be a pale gray-blue light appearing through the curtains that would tell this young man it was time for him to seek his overcoat and get home to Bond Street. He accompanied them everywhere—garden parties, flowers shows, private views, military tournaments, concerts, theatres, dinners, dances ; he was included in all invitations as a matter of course ; and if ill-natured people laughed and said that Lady Helen was rather too openly qualifying for the post of daughter-in-law, these remarks did not reach the ears of the tall and stately lady who acted as her chaperon with so much tact and shrewdness and good humour. Those three, always arriving together and always leaving together, came to be looked on as a family group. No two young people ever had such opportunities of

studying each other's nature and disposition. And then again the house in Upper Brook Street was quite close to Hyde Park : looking slantwise from the drawing-room windows, you could see the trees, and the long swaths of green, and the carriages driving by ; and sometimes, when Sidney called in the morning (for orders, as it were), Mrs. Hume would be busy, or would affect to be busy, and would send the two children, as she occasionally called them, for a stroll in the Park, where they could amuse themselves by admiring the flower-plots—the crimson and golden-yellow tulips, the beds of pansies, the borders of none-so-pretty—and by chatting and talking to each other, and scrutinising the people in the carriages, until they considered it time for the elder lady to be ready. It was a perfumed, artificial sort of life, perhaps. Sidney, absently lounging about the drawing-room, and looking at the masses of geraniums and cythus and marguerites in the balconies outside the three windows, might have said in his heart he would rather have had the sight of a lush meadow yellowed with buttercups ; but one cannot have everything ; and London is really very pretty towards the end of May, especially when the trees in the parks are stirred with a west wind, and there is a universal shivering and glancing of leaves in the pallid sunlight, rendered the more effective by the gathering gloom of some banked-up purple clouds.

Yet not always and at every hour and moment was he thus their bounden slave. He claimed and exercised a certain liberty ; he would run across to the Oval for some cricket match ; he would look in at the tennis-court at Lord's ; and he was most assiduous in keeping up his fencing. But his favourite resort during an unoccupied half-hour was the British Museum ; and it was not the books and gems that drew him thither, but rather the sculpture rooms—those silent and lone-echoing halls, where the solitary stranger may dream dreams. This poor, forlorn, abducted Caryatid, for example, broken-nosed,

begrimed, deserted—is she thinking of her five radiant sisters, far away on the lofty height, looking across the wide valleys to the gray-green slopes of Hymettus murmuring of its bees? Then those various voiceless fragments of busts and limbs: when they were compact and alive, in the distant times, surely they must have listened to the laughter of Greek maidens by the Fountain of Callirrhoe, down there in the plain, where the Ilissus trickles along its arid channel, or sweeps in storm-flood, tawny and turbulent, through the sparse olive groves. Nay, this young fellow standing here—who might himself have been taken for a Greek youth of the great days—he had some little bit of imagination too. When the sunlight fell from the roof and lay in broad squares on the floor, it was easy to forget the great outside world of London; it was easy to summon up another vision—the steep white steps of the Propylæa—the wide country stretching down to Phalerum—the long curve of Salamis—the blue waters of the Gulf of Ægina basking in the heat. He was sorry for this poor forlorn Caryatid. The bees on Mount Hymettus would be murmuring now.

He was more familiar, less reverential, with the Romans—with the portrait busts. He would stand before them and ask them questions; would try to discover what they had been really like—what they had done and thought. Here was the large-eyed, mild-featured Marcus Aurelius. “Tell me, now,” he would say to those blank eyes, “was your philosophy living and actual and a part of yourself, or were you only playing with phrases to console yourself a little, or to keep up your courage, or perhaps merely to display your wisdom? Could you really hold yourself so superior to all the buffets of chance and the opinion of your fellow-creatures? Is it true that you could so serenely contemplate being swallowed up in the universal substance, following Chrysippus and Socrates and Epictetus into the unknown? Impervious to any dint of fortune you professed to be; yet they say you betrayed violent grief when

Faustina died. Was that quite consistent? But perhaps you forgot the philosopher and revealed the man?"

Lady Helen's courtship of this beautiful youth, however subtly planned and skilfully carried out (with varying moods and petulances), was not progressing very satisfactorily. He was always most polite and kind to her, even as he was always obedient to the imperiously good-natured mamma; but he did not make much of her favours; and he did not seek for any secrets, nor endeavour to monopolise her society when they were at any ball or party together. What seems still more inhuman and incredible, he did not even sympathise with her piteous attempts at learning Greek; and when at last, worn out with dialects and dual numbers and dots, she yielded to a fit of temper and flung dictionary and grammar and all the rest from her on to the table, and declared she would have done with the whole thing, he merely gathered the volumes together, and said, with a laugh, that she was very wise, seeing that so many excellent "cribs" were being issued from day to day. Nevertheless, in a pathetic kind of fashion, she did what she could to associate herself with his favourite studies and pursuits. She was an eager admirer of Greek intaglios and cameos; she professed sympathy with the ladies who are or used to be desirous of introducing Greek costume—though she herself did not propose to walk along Oxford Street in *chiton* and *chlaina*; Minerva became for her Athene; and Zeus, not Jupiter, ruled over the gods; while she was profoundly interested in certain historical projects of which Sidney had rather indifferently told her—projects that promised to lead him away into personal exploration of the

"Chersonese,

Where the thundering Bosphorus answers the thunder of Pontic seas."

She half intimated that she also would like to visit those legendary shores, under the kind guardianship that had now been established. For this Upper Brook Street experiment had worked admirably well: why should it cease with the

autumn dispersal ? And Mrs. Hume seemed not unwilling to continue at her not very onerous post. Perhaps the elder lady may have considered that the whole situation would have been rendered more explicit by the introduction of a wedding-ring ; but she was too shrewd to press matters. For this son of hers, with all his filial obedience, had a sort of sensitive personal pride. She limited herself to an occasional hint, apparently of the most haphazard kind ; and meanwhile, the longer this arrangement existed, the more natural did it appear to be. Why should these three separate, either now, or at the end of the season, or at any time ?

“Ah, Helen,” said Mrs. Hume one morning, before Mr. Sidney had made his appearance, “you might make me a very happy woman if you chose.”

For she affected to believe that it was the young lady who was coy.

Lady Helen laughed, and coloured a little.

“I know what you mean, dear Mrs. Hume,” said she. “I don’t pretend not to know what you mean. But that is about the last thing likely to happen in this world. Oh, there are fifty reasons against it—a hundred ! For one thing, our interests are so different ; he is taken up with his historical schemes, and I with the frivolities of this town. And then another very excellent reason is that he doesn’t like me——”

“Helen, how can you say so ?” the elder woman remonstrated, warmly. “He is devoted to you—I never saw such constant attention and kindness——”

“No, no, no !” the other said, with wilful insistence. “I understand him well. There is only one thing he tolerates about me, and that is my name. He addresses me by name, but he is thinking of another Helen—the Helen who came to ‘Ilion’s towers.’ That was somebody worth thinking about, somebody of importance. But as for the actual women he meets—the vain, frivolous, ignorant, vacillating creatures—I know he holds us all in contempt——”

"Helen, how entirely, how provokingly mistaken you are!" Mrs. Hume exclaimed again.

"Oh, I know, I know," her companion persisted. "I can see it in his eyes. They are the most extraordinary eyes! They look right through you. There's no hiding from them. They seem to command you to be honest; and, you know, that isn't always convenient; honesty is very well—but you may have too much of it. And then his marvellous quickness! He sees what you are going to say before you have half got it said; and then I am haunted by the terror that he will turn away, to let you know it wasn't worth saying——"

"Really, Helen, you don't pay me any compliment about Sidney's upbringing—if he can be guilty of such rudeness——"

"Rudeness?" the younger woman broke in. "Nothing of the kind! He does not take the trouble to be rude. But you feel conscious of such a terrible standard of honesty. No pretty little bit of hypocrisy and make-believe: say what you've got to say, madam, and don't give yourself airs and graces! Why, we were looking over the Marmor Homericum—you know—the Baron de Triquetis—and we came to the head of Aphrodite—the smiling one, with the mirror—and I said, 'No wonder she smiles when she looks in the mirror.' Well, he never uttered a word. And I knew what he was thinking; I knew perfectly; he was inwardly saying, 'If you wish for a compliment, you must make the invitation a little less coarse and obvious.' No, he remained absolutely silent; as hard as iron; brutally stiff, I call it; for, after all, human nature wants a little give and take. Other people have mirrors, besides Aphrodite among her dolphins——"

By this time Mrs. Hume was inclined to smile.

"I don't know what strange fancies you have got into your head, Helen," she observed at length, "but clearly it is not owing to anything Sidney has said or done. Why should you imagine such things about him?—for it is all

your own imagination. If he has been accidentally silent on some occasion——”

“Oh, he is a great deal too perfect,” Lady Helen said, with angry impatience, “and he expects every one else to be the same.”

And here Mrs. Hume did actually break into laughter.

“Poor lad !” said she. “I had always thought that his chief failing was an excessive modesty. But mothers are blind creatures.”

With all her other engagements Lady Helen was at this time having her portrait painted by Mr. Mellord, the great Academician ; and the days on which she gave him sittings Mrs. Hume devoted to her own immediate relatives ; for several of her married sons and daughters had come to town, and there was a good deal of visiting to be done within the wide family circle. Lady Helen went off alone, accompanied only by her maid Willis, who was quite content to sit for hours in the spacious hall of white and black marble, looking at the plashing fountain, and the alabaster swan, and the flowers, with the occasional distraction of the appearance of a visitor. It is true, Lady Helen had hinted to Sidney Hume that if he would come and talk to her in the studio, the famous Academician would not only not object, but would really welcome him, for it would allow him to give all his time to his painting and his pipe. But Sidney did not respond to this invitation. The “History of the Scythians,” for example, demanded wide research. Lady Helen went alone with her maid.

Now on the evening of one of those sitting days she returned with a certain air of triumph ; though it was always difficult to tell, from her mysteriously reticent eyes, what her real mood was. The three of them sat down to an early dinner, or to an apology for a dinner, for they were going to the Haymarket Theatre later on ; and hardly had Lady Helen’s guests taken their places, when it became evident that she had recently encountered some unusual experience.

"Yes, indeed," she said, with animation, "I have had some little amusement to-day. Very different from the ordinary thing—sitting deadly still and being stared at ; watching Mr. Mellord fill his pipe ; listening to detached sentences that are not meant to have any meaning in them ; afraid to speak lest you should alter your expression ; wondering whether you are looking dull and heavy and stupid, and whether that will appear in the portrait. No, there was little of that to-day. The fact is, I happened to see Captain Erle as we were driving down—he lives in Kensington Gore, you know—and I stopped the carriage, and asked him whether he wouldn't come in and sit with me for a while in Mr. Mellord's studio, and he said 'Yes' directly, and in we went. There was a difference ! You know what an amusing man he is, dear Mrs. Hume—been everywhere—seen everything—with a trick of mock exaggeration—mere cynicism—that is really very funny ; and Mr. Mellord was as much cheered up as I was ; I am sure it must have put ever so much more spirit into his work. I don't know how long Captain Erle stayed—the time went quickly enough anyhow ; and I was very grateful ; indeed, I asked him to come to our box at the Haymarket to-night."

Nothing was said for a second, but at length Mrs. Hume remarked, somewhat coldly, "Of course you know best, Helen, but don't you think Mr. Mellord considered it rather odd that you should take a stranger with you into his studio ? "

"Oh dear no ! " she made answer, with an easy confidence.

"He was delighted—charmed. Of course he knew Captain Erle by name. And as for me, I would not have believed that sitting to have one's portrait painted could be made quite pleasant. And as I say, I think I ought to show my gratitude. I think we must ask Captain Erle to come home with us to-night for supper, if he cares for such a mild form of dissipation."

And again there was silence—until Sidney observed that

he would leave a message with the people at the theatre, so that Captain Erle should have no difficulty in finding the box.

Nor had Captain Erle any difficulty in finding the box. He had the air of a man who could make his way about without much difficulty. He was about thirty; of middle height; sun-tanned face, with short side whiskers; spare of form and wiry-looking; rather elaborately dressed, with a conspicuous button-hole. Lady Helen made much of him from the very outset; turned and talked to him almost continuously, from behind her fan, while the performance was proceeding; and had hardly a word for any one else. They could have received but the baldest idea of what the piece was; they laughed and chatted—for the most part about the sayings and doings and characteristics of the people they knew. The poor players, doing their best, were all unheeded.

Then he drove home with them to Upper Brook Street; and when they went into the dining-room it looked exceedingly cool and pleasant on this hot night; for there were on the snow-white table blocks of ice festooned with maidenhair fern, and tall salvers filled with yellow roses; while the windows had been left open, with some partial screening-out of any inquisitive passer-by. Supper was a mere farce—except, perhaps, as regards the strawberries. Lady Helen's sole attention and her mirthful eyes were centred on her new guest, while he was telling her merry tales of the experience and escapades of officers' wives in India. Not that he addressed himself exclusively to her, but he addressed himself chiefly to her because she was his hostess; the others were free to listen if they liked. And perhaps the grand-looking lady who presided at this table did condescend to listen, with a certain cold austerity of demeanour; but as for Sidney, his eyes were absent; clearly he was thinking of quite other and distant things—perhaps of the oars that

“won their way

*Where the narrowing Symplegades whitened the straits of Propontis
with spray?”*

No, this was not as the other evenings had been ; the little family group had been invaded and disconcerted ; a stranger had been introduced—a stranger who had no kind of idea of remaining a stranger, but seemed resolved upon monopolising the whole of Lady Helen's replies and smiles and hospitalities. When Sidney Hume's wandering fancies came back from the shores of the Propontis, he rapidly discovered that he was being bored. He listened for a while, indifferently. And then, as he did not see why he should go on being bored, he rose and begged Lady Helen to excuse him, and bade her good-night. She pressed him to stay, but he said he had been keeping too late hours recently. And, of course, when he left, Captain Erle had to go also.

Now, as Sidney walked along to his hotel, he was inclined to be angrily resentful over this intrusion, but not so much on his own account as on account of his mother. Mrs. Hume, as Lady Helen was well aware, had a particular dislike towards this man ; she had done all that could be expected of her in the way of civility when he called of an afternoon ; and it was not fair—at least so her son judged—that she should be confronted with him in the intimacy of a little after-theatre supper-party. It argued a certain want of delicacy on the part of Lady Helen, in view of the particular position Mrs. Hume held in the house. Or downright selfishness ? Personally, he had no quarrel with Captain Erle. He regarded him as a fair type of the ordinary man about town. But he had a great regard and respect for his mother ; and so annoyed was he over this lack of consideration (as he deemed it) that he had thoughts of going along the next morning and demanding that she should at once return to Henley, himself accompanying her.

But on that next morning Lady Helen came downstairs in a most penitent mood. She knew she had done wrong, and she begged of her dear Mrs. Hume to forgive her. She had been vexed and hurt by Mr. Sidney's masterful and

half-contemptuous ways, and by his refusal to go to Mr. Mellord's studio with her ; and she had accidentally caught a glimpse of Captain Erle in Kensington Gore, and some madness had possessed her to stop and speak to him, with all that followed thereafter. And did the mother think that Mr. Sidney would forgive her too? He could not be mortally offended? What was Captain Erle to her? Indeed, it was almost impertinent of him to intrude on so chance an invitation.

And very contrite the fair penitent still remained when Mr. Sidney made his appearance ; and she was extraordinarily kind to him ; and would willingly have given up going to some ceremony of trooping the colour in St. James's Park, whither they were bound, if only she could have heard of some lecture on Greek excavations which they could attend. And that evening, again, when they had to go to a dance at a big house near the top of Kensington Palace Gardens, she quite overwhelmed him with her gracious favour. She said she was ready to 'sit out' any number of dances with him, for the night was hot ; so they remained apart, listening to the music and the swift whistle of slippers on the waxed floor, or they sat on the stairs and talked, or they made adventurous excursions into nooks and corners in search of cool currents, while all the time she was at once vivacious and merry and tender. On one of these voyages of discovery they had wandered back into the supper-room, which was now serving as a sort of buffet ; and here they found open doors leading into a conservatory into which they had not as yet penetrated. It certainly was not a cool place, as they found when they entered, for the air was heavy with the odours of pendulous blossoms ; but there was a trickling of water somewhere that was pleasant enough. The glass roof was vaulted.

"If we could only turn off those electric lights," she said, at haphazard, "I suppose we should find the stars looking down on us."

"I shouldn't wonder," he said, in the same idle fashion,

“if the new day was beginning to show—over the trees in Kensington Gardens.”

But presently she said, with a little becoming hesitation : “There is one thing I want to ask of you, now that we have a moment by ourselves. I hope you won’t mind. And I do think that—that, considering the terms on which we are, you might drop a small and useless formality that comes between us. I really hate to be called Lady Helen by any one I know intimately. Why don’t you call me Helen ? ”

“Well,” he said, “it is much more simple and natural, and you are very kind.”

“Then may I call you Sidney ? ” she asked, with a pretty affectation of shyness.

“Why, yes, of course. Everybody calls me Sidney,” was the answer.

“Everybody ! ” she said, impatiently. “I don’t allow everybody to call me Helen. However,” she went on, with a return to her good-nature, “that is of little consequence. It is to be Sidney and Helen, then ? A compact ? ”

“By all means,” he responded. “Though there may have to be some compromise now and again—before strangers, you know.”

“But it is a compact ? Then here is my hand on it,” she said, frankly, and with frank eyes.

Now if she had held his hand for but one second, or even for two, nothing need have happened ; it was the inadvertent third second that wrought the mischief ; for here was Mrs. Hume at those open glass doors.

“I have been searching for you people everywhere,” she exclaimed. “Do you know how late, or how early, it is ? ”

The quickly withdrawn palm in the third second was too late. Mrs. Hume had sharp and shrewd eyes ; she hesitated only for a moment, where another woman would have made some blundering excuse and sought retreat. As for her, she went quickly forward, smiling, happy, and took

Lady Helen's hands in hers, and kissed her effusively on both cheeks.

"Dearest, dearest Helen!" she said. And shortly thereafter the three of them were driving homewards, mostly in silence, and with sufficiently varied thoughts.

CHAPTER VI.

"WITH HER APRIL EYES."

It was the first day of June, and a glory of summer lay over the land. Out here at Henley the fair and cloudless blue of the sky seemed to be far away and remote from the slumbering earth; all the vast intervening space was a shining wonder of light; while the variable airs that floated in butterfly fashion hither and thither were fresh and sweet with the scent of the hawthorn and the lilacs and the masses of wall-flower, golden-yellow and crimson, that basked in the hot sun. The prevailing silence seemed all the more intense because of the silver trilling of the larks and the calling of children in the distant meadows on the Berkshire side of the stream. There was hardly any other sound, and there was but little sign of life either on the river, or along its banks, or even in the town itself; for high noon at Henley (except at Regatta-time) means an old-world, old-fashioned drowsiness and torpor and content, sufficiently impressive to any one who has just come away from the furious London whirl. The golden tassels of the laburnum droop idly in the still sunshine; a dog asleep on a doorstep can dream on without fear of disturbance.

And it was to escape into this gracious calm and quiet, it was to face certain problems that loom large in the imagination of four-and-twenty, that Sidney Hume had abruptly fled away from London. He had found an admirable excuse. Quite recent discoveries of inscriptions had again drawn his attention to a subject that had always

had for him a curious fascination—the wanderings, namely, of those companies of Greek actors who, in the centuries immediately preceding the birth of Christ, went travelling all over Asia, not only performing the old masterpieces of Greek tragedy and comedy, but also carrying with them a poet—each little troupe with its own poet—for the production of new pieces. India beheld those *thiasi*, those bands of strolling players; Egypt treated them well; from court to court they went, from festival to festival; amply paid and amply belauded; exempt from military service—in fact, the spoiled children of Dionysus; each nomadic corporation complete within itself—actors, singers, costume-makers, manager, treasurer, with likewise the harmless, necessary poet. And what, now, if this young Fellow of All Souls' were to lay aside, for a time at least, his inchoate and dusky Scythian studies to take up a much more bright and vivid theme, that appealed far more directly to his own tastes and sympathies? But then he would have to look round among his books; and his books were at Henley. So down he came to Henley; and no doubt his mother and Lady Helen assumed, perhaps with some touch of impatience, that it was this new subject that had demanded so great a sacrifice of him just as the London season was nearing its height.

Nevertheless, as he now wandered in solitary self-communion along the placid banks of the Thames, or loitered high up among the Wargrave woods, it was not the Dionysia of two thousand years ago that chiefly claimed his attention. He was confronted with the problem of his own future, and that in a very pressing and peremptory manner. For it was clear that his mother expected him to marry Lady Helen Yorke; and not only that, but she seemed to assume that Lady Helen herself was also looking forward to this natural climax. Assuredly Lady Helen had gone out of her way to show him every mark of her favour. She had presented him with the beautiful head of Hera that now confined his scarf; she ostentatiously wore the little

trinket he had given her at Oxford ; she called him Sidney, and Helen she was to him when no strangers were present ; while she had so continually associated herself with him and his pursuits that even at this moment, though he was not conscious of any more mysterious and more powerful magnetism, her mere absence left with him an undefined sense of loneliness. It is true that no word or sign of any understanding had passed between them. The little ceremony that Mrs. Hume had so inopportunately beheld and misinterpreted meant nothing at all, though it was obviously impossible for either of them to tell her so. Indeed, this young fellow found himself in a very awkward position, though how he had got there he hardly knew ; and the question was whether he should at once back out of it, or go on and answer to the expectations that appeared to have been formed.

Then came the next question—a question of appalling importance truly : What was this passion of love that the poets had been writing about all these centuries, and was it a necessary prelude to marriage ? He had had his youthful fancies, of a nebulously sentimental nature, of course. As a mere school-boy he had been captivated by the fair, insomuch that his jealous rage and championship had led him into fisticuffs. But as a young man, while the sister or cousin of one of his college companions may have attracted him by reason of her pretty profile or graceful figure, the charm was but momentary ; while in ordinary society he found himself most drawn to a girl or woman who could talk amusingly and cleverly, no matter what might be her equipment in the way of good looks. But this passion of love, which so far he had escaped, surely it was a real thing ? It was not merely in literature that Aphrodite the implacable—‘implacable Cypris, Cypris terrible, Cypris of mortals detested’—slew the sons of men ? Did he not see amid the ordinary news of the day how some poor devil of a solicitor’s clerk—nay, even some Crown-prince—must needs go and blow his brains out, overcome by this madness

of love and despair? On the other hand, there was surely no allurements, nothing desirable, in any such tempestuous frenzy? Surely a union based on esteem and liking and congenial tastes would better commend itself to a reasonable human being. The great bulk of mortals appeared to go through their lives without the need of any chorus to cry, 'O woe! woe! woe!' His own brothers and sisters, for example: they were all getting comfortably along, happily settled, as far as one could make out, and as merry as grigs at the occasional family gatherings in London. He knew his mother was a managing woman; but she had managed very well for them; and why should not he allow his inclinations to wander in the direction she approved? Lady Helen was of good birth; she had charming manners—though she was a little bit capricious and quick-tempered at times; if she was a few years older than himself, she was still a reigning beauty; and if it came to that, he thought he could make her a better husband, a more considerate helpmate, than that insufferably conceited ass Captain Erle. 'Above all, be sane,' he kept repeating to himself. In such an all-important thing as marriage, why should one give way to delirium?

It was in the midst of these cogitations—which, however just and rational they may have sounded in his mental ears, left behind them a curious haunting sensation of uneasiness and distrust, as if he had been persuading himself to go forward to do something from which he instinctively shrunk back—it was in the midst of these representations and forecasts that Sidney chanced to find himself on Henley bridge, and there he paused for a moment to look at a boat that was coming down stream. The solitary oarsman was a podgy young man in gay white flannels and smart straw hat, who was evidently proud of his performance, looking neither to right nor to left, but swinging along in splendid style. Sidney waited to see him shoot the bridge—no great feat, by-the-way, for the arches, though low, are wide enough; but it suddenly became evident that in his blind

eagerness the oarsman had forgotten all about the bridge, that he was, in fact, about to go full tilt on to the middle pier.

"Hi, man! Look out! Where are you coming to?" Hume yelled.

It was too late. Crash went the bow on to the stone buttress; one oar flew out of the young man's hand; the boat swung round, and the next instant all had disappeared, borne on by the current. Sidney ran to the other side of the bridge. The first thing he saw was an oar; then the boat, keel uppermost; then the young man violently struggling in the water, wildly pawing with both arms, and doing his dead best to drown himself. For a second he got hold of an oar, but that seemed to yield with him; or perhaps in his fright he did not know what he was doing; at all events, he let go, and was again helplessly floundering. This could not last long, as Sidney Hume perceived. He hastily dispossessed himself of his coat and hat, slipped over the parapet, dived, and presently, after a few rapid strokes, had reached and seized this dangerous creature, who clung to him with frantic grips. At the same moment a young fellow, who happened to be pushing off in a gondola a little further down the river, gently and skilfully propelled that long black vessel towards these two. Sidney caught hold of the steel prow, the gondolier continued his cautious course, and in a couple of minutes they were at the bank, where there was plenty of assistance to help them out. Another boat was put off to intercept the wrecked craft, the oars, and the elegant straw hat—all of which were gently floating down on the stream. The incident did not excite much attention; they are used to such things at Henley; besides, there was hardly any one about. At first the stout young man, all dripping and dishevelled, seemed too bewildered and exhausted to understand what had just occurred; he stood there in limp fashion, panting and gasping to recover his breath.

"Better go into the Red Lion, sir, and get a drop of

brandy," said one of the bystanders who had helped to drag him on shore. "Here, take my arm, sir."

And mutely, and without a word of thanks to his rescuer, he obeyed; while Sidney, also dripping, had to go back to the bridge to pick up his coat and hat; thence he made his way home, which was no great distance.

But about half an hour thereafter, Sidney Hume, sitting in the front garden of Lilac Cottage, and deeply buried in Müller's *Bühnenalterthümer*, was startled by the appearance of a stranger: startled, because he seemed to know, and yet not to know, who this was. Surely he had seen that dumpy figure—the clean-shaven features—the odd expression? And then it flashed upon him that this was no other than the adventurous oarsman he had but recently fished out of the Thames—now no longer, alas! a dapper youth in boating flannels, but a nondescript creature of sombre hue, in garments that were certainly never made for him. The new-comer opened the gate and came along the path; there was a deprecatory look on his face.

"I beg your pardon," said he, quite humbly. "I have come to apologise. They told me at the Red Lion where I should find you. Awfully sorry I let you go without a word of thanks. And I've got to apologise, too, for these wretched things," he continued, looking down discontentedly at his borrowed clothes. "Don't wonder you should have noticed them."

Sidney was not aware that he had been guilty of any such rudeness.

"The best they could do for me—while my own things are getting dried," the young man proceeded. "But I didn't want to lose any time in making an apology. Awful bad form, you must have thought it——"

"Not at all, not at all," Sidney said. "You make too much of a little trifle like that. People are always tumbling into the water at Henley and getting helped out—you should see the Regatta-time——"

"Oh, that's all very well. They told me at the Lion

what happened. You jumped off the bridge. And you needn't think, because at the moment I am wearing a suit of waiter's clothes, that I don't know how grateful I ought to be ; and I would have said so before, only I was confused when I came out of the water. Awful bad form, you must have thought it ; and I want to apologise. My name is Erridge ; here is my card——"

He was about to search his pockets, when a quick look of vexation came over his face.

"By the holy poker !" he exclaimed, "I've left every mortal thing in my togs, and they'll all be boiled to pulp. Never mind. My name is Erridge—Dick Erridge—I live at 12 Ransome Terrace, Richmond—and if, any time you are passing, you would look in and have a snack, I'd fix you up as well as I could——" He again became conscious of his clothes. "You needn't imagine, because I'm wearing these infernal things, that I can't produce a decent glass of fizz when a friend calls."

"You're very kind," Sidney responded. "And now can I offer you anything ? If you've swallowed a mouthful or two of Thames water, it wants some qualifying."

"No, thanks—no, thanks," the young man said. There was evidently something on his mind. "It's the other way about. The fact is, I ran down to Henley this morning, intending to visit some friends of mine in the afternoon ; and I was merely putting by an hour or two when the accident occurred—an accident, yes !—not good business trying to burst Henley bridge in two ! Well, I can't go and call on them now——"

"Why not ?" said Sidney.

"Like this ?" he remonstrated, regarding his costume with extreme disgust. "Call on them ? Looking like a waiter out of employment ?"

"The clothes are good enough ! Besides, your friends won't care what kind of clothes you are wearing."

"Well, I care," the other said, doggedly. "I know what's what. I know when I'm shipshape ; and I know when I

could hire myself out as a dod-gasted scarecrow. And even when my own togs are dried, they'll be all rumpled up as if they'd been sent home in a basket of dirty linen. I'm not going up to see Jim Summers like this—Mr. Summers, I mean—Mr. Summers : perhaps you don't know him ? ”

“No, I think not.”

“He hasn't been long in this neighbourhood, and he lives a mile or two out of the town,” continued this communicative young man. “He and his daughter. I don't know what has put it into his head, but he seems to have taken a fancy for making a hermit of himself—hiding in the woods like a dormouse or a hedgehog—and so I thought it would be only friendly to run down now and again and wake the old chap up. I intended to have driven down, but one of my cobs wants a little bit of quiet and doctoring—oh, nothing—nothing to speak of ; and so I came along by rail—to jam my moon-struck head against Henley bridge.”

“But why shouldn't you call on your friends all the same ? ” Sidney inquired, good-naturedly. He began to be quite interested in this guileless youth.

He stretched out his arms, displaying his bulging sleeves, he looked down on his twisted trousers, with an inexpressible loathing.

“Like this ? ” he repeated, almost reproachfully. “Like this ? Why, Jim Summers is the best fellow in the world—Mr. Summers, I mean—but he'd burst out laughing ; he'd ask me where the petroleum was, so that I could set myself on fire for a Guy Fawkes. No ; what I want to suggest, Mr. Hume—I understand that is your name, and I am proud to make your acquaintance, as I ought to be after the good turn you did me to-day—well, as I can't go to call on my friends, because of these infernal rags, I thought you might come along to the Red Lion and have a bit of early dinner with me. Oh, they'll do you proper at the Lion—trust me for that—Pommery A1—asparagus the best out of Covent Garden. Of course it's rather

cheeky of me to ask you—and you mightn't like to walk with anybody dressed in clothes like these——”

“Your clothes are good enough, man!” Sidney said, brusquely.

“But don't you see, I could slip along first—and we'd have a private room,” the young man went on. “I want to show you that I am sensible of what you did for me. I'm a stupid ass, I know, and I was confused when I got out of the water; but I am not such a bounder as to walk off, just after having my life saved, without a word of thanks—except through a mistake, as I say. And I'll go along now and see about things. What hour shall we fix?”

However, Sidney, with some ambiguous promises as to the future, got out of this hospitable invitation; and Dick Erridge was going rather disappointedly away, when an idea seemed to strike him. He stopped at the gate.

“Got anything on the Manchester cup?” he asked of Sidney.

“No,” was the casual reply.

And then at once the stout young man grew alert and happy; here was one small way in which he could show his gratitude.

“Red Wallet,” said he, significantly. “Don't you pay any heed to what happened at Epsom—that's all understood. If you can get on at 9 to 1, you plank down a tidyish bit: it's a good thing, I tell ye. Red Wallet. Don't forget.”

“I won't,” said Sidney. “Good-bye. And I hope we shall meet again.”

“When I'm less like an all-fired scarecrow than I am at present,” the young man said, with a grim laugh; and then he took his leave, and hurried away along to the hotel, to get in out of the daylight. Sidney returned to his seat under the veranda and to his book, and very soon forgot all about the luckless oarsman whom he had piloted ashore from the middle of the Thames.

Next morning there came a letter from London, and even as he opened it there fluttered out a newspaper cutting—a paragraph which gave a most flattering description of Lady Helen's appearance at the last F. O. reception, with full details of her costume and ornaments, the latter including the famous Monks-Hatton sapphires. But indeed this communication from Mrs. Hume was all about Lady Helen, and about what she and the writer were doing or about to do. Dearest Helen, he was told, was *so* good. They had met Captain Erle in the Park on the previous Sunday morning, but she had not stopped to speak to him, which would have ended in his turning and walking with them; she had merely bowed and passed on. Helen and she were going that night to Covent Garden to hear *Lohengrin*. There was to be a great gathering of Hays and Humes at the Caledonian Ball; and dear Helen was looking forward with the greatest interest to making the acquaintance of certain members of the family whom she had not yet met. And so forth. Then came an urgent entreaty that he should return. Had he not found sufficient books? Could he not bring them to London? Or, indeed, postpone this literary work altogether until the season was over? And then, of course, there was a post-script: "You will see by the enclosed that the papers speak of the jewellery Helen wore at the Foreign Office the other night; but they failed to notice a *small gold amulet*, which she never parts with."

It was but a letter, to be laid aside and forgotten, if he chose. Yet all that morning, as he sat in the quiet garden overlooking the river, amid the soft sweet scents of the lilac bushes and the southernwood, the pictures summoned up by the pages of Müller or Lüders were again and again being interfered with and superseded by far other and different scenes. The Hellenistic world of two thousand years ago, dumb and distant, gave place to the modern world of London, with its continuous, monotonous murmur of fashion and festivity. And what if he were to yield to

this urgent appeal? He knew not whither his consent might lead; but he knew the desire that was in his mother's heart. Then again he returned to his curious questionings: were the passionate frenzy, the bitter longing, the agony and despair of love mere tricks of trade on the part of the poets, mere conventionalities of literature?—or, on the other hand, if they were only too real, were they not things to be avoided by any sane person wishing to remain sane? Moreover, if he now returned to London, the season would not last for ever. He could take some books with him to fill in the odd hours. Then would come a cessation of that mad pursuit of pleasure; then would come quiet and application, with perhaps some definite achievement of work to justify his training and his toil.

And yet, plausible as this reasoning may have been, it left behind it, as his former dim speculations had done, the strangest restlessness, and even a dull, nameless, inexplicable regret. At last he threw down the book. He could bear this inaction, these haunting meditations, no longer. He got his stick and hat and set forth. All this bright, breezy, beautiful world seemed to call for some joy of motion, some freer breathing, some happier elasticity of thought. The tall poplars were swaying and rustling against the blue of the sky; the drooping willows dipped and trembled over the stream; the big leaves of the wistaria in the trellis-work were blown across the branches of purple blossom; while the gusts of wind, alternating with bursts of sunlight, struck the surface of the river into wide sheets of silver, though there was a sharp gleam of azure further along, where the daisied fields appeared to meet. And when he got further out into the country, all this moving, changing panorama seemed to grow more vivid and intense. Now a row of elms along an upland height would grow almost black against the deep cerulean spaces of the heavens; again the sunlight, springing down upon a field of charlock, would produce a glare of lemon-yellow bewildering to the eye. Rooks were cawing above the topmost branches; larks

carolling high in the clear air ; sheep bleating in the distant pastures ; a cock bidding bold defiance from some neighbouring farm : about the only silent creature he encountered was a cuckoo that with noiseless hawklike flight sought shelter in the umbrageous foliage of a sycamore. A summer day it was, though with some surviving look of the spring about it. There even came a sudden shower ; but as the rain fell in the open sunlight between the golden-green meadows and a shadowed line of upland, it merely formed a shimmering silver veil, that gradually disappeared, leaving heat behind.

And quite springlike was the next thing he saw when he returned to the town. It was a wedding at St. Mary's Church, and the bells were ringing, and the coachmen wore fine nosegays, and twin rows of young damsels, each holding a basket of flowers, waited to scatter blossoms in the path of the bride as she walked from the church door to the gate. It was going to be a pretty sight, and he thought he would stay to see it. It was of our own time : why should it not interest him as much as the chanting of the twelve Laconian maidens outside the Spartan bridal bower of Helen ? A small sprinkling of a crowd, mostly women, had gathered round the gate, murmuring in their talk, and benignly expectant.

Then the bride appeared, in all her white array, leaning on the arm of the bridegroom, and followed by her bridesmaids and friends ; and as the newly married couple came along the pathway to the gate, the small wenches with the baskets threw flowers before them, but especially before the feet of the bride, who hardly looked to one side or the other, so agitated was she. Yet this was a happy wedding. The sun shone on it and on the gay procession of folks ; and Sidney thought the scattering of those handfuls of blossoms a very winsome ceremony—here in front of the old-fashioned English church, in the quiet old-fashioned English town.

And now—now came his undoing, the work of an instant.

There had been standing not far from him a young girl whom he had hardly noticed, for her back was towards him, and he had been chiefly occupied in watching the small lasses strewing the flowers. But as soon as the bride had passed, this girl turned to come away ; and as she did so, her eyes suddenly encountered his. She had not been prepared to meet the gaze of any stranger ; she also had been regarding that pretty spectacle of the children and the fluttering marguerites and pansies ; and she was smiling in sympathy, her lips slightly parted, her eyes full of amiability and kindness. Nay, for him, startled as he was, they were full of far more than that : all the spring and all the summer seemed to dwell there, and the sweet desire of youth, and innocence, and the timidity of a fawn. He was vaguely aware of a bewilderment of beauty about her face, and of a clear and rose-tinted complexion ; and likewise there was some kind of surrounding glory of hair. But these things were as nothing ; he only knew that in this moment of self-forgetfulness on her part he had unwittingly gazed into her very soul—shining in those happy, youthful eyes that were as blue as the blue of a June sea. Then, the next instant, frightened, she had withdrawn that inadvertent glance, and had continued on her way, her head downcast, her steps somewhat hurried. He stood transfixed, breathless, almost benumbed, as it were. He saw her pass quickly along the pavement. Why, even the very colours of her dress—the cool light lilacs, with a touch of yellow and white—seemed also to speak of youth and freshness, and the blooms and sprays of the early summer. Was it some vision that had been vouchsafed him ?—for she had suddenly disappeared. He had no power to follow ; he dared not follow ; he felt as though he had already been guilty of some wrong.

And perhaps he had. For in that moment of forgetfulness and smiling sympathy and good wishes her eyes also had met his, and had found something there. Alas ! that was the tragic part of it.

CHAPTER VII.

"IMPLACABLE CYPRIS."

THIS haunted street seemed strangely empty ; it was as if all the singing of all the birds had suddenly ceased from the sky, and the earth been stricken dumb with dismay. Yet that was no incorporeal vision of the loveliness of the summer that he had beheld for a fleeting moment or two. Those eyes that had unwittingly gazed into his were human—too human, perhaps, in that second of self-revelation ; and altogether human was the sympathy and kindness and unconscious well-wishing that shone in the bright young face with its smiling lips. There was nothing ghostly or phantomlike about the clear wild-rose tints of her complexion—that seemed to speak of June and hedge-rows and sunlight—nor yet about the waves and tangles of golden-brown hair, which, even as she turned from him, he had perceived clustering about her singularly white neck and small ear. And then somehow an immeasurable pity filled his heart. Why should she have to hurry away with downcast head, as one abashed and ashamed ? Was it her fault that the pretty spectacle of the children strewing flowers should have made her oblivious of herself for a brief instant ? Was it not rather his fault that, bewildered as he was, he had not with sufficient quickness avoided that wholly inadvertent glance ? He had inflicted wrong without any hope of making reparation. For, even if he were to encounter this beautiful young creature again, how was he to let her know that he held himself wholly to blame for anything that had occurred ? That meant speech, whereas a mere look had been sufficient to frighten her away like a startled fawn.

That he would be certain to see her again in a small place like Henley he made no doubt at all. Most probably she was a visitor down from London for the summer months, and she and her friends on their way to the bridge or the

river-side would naturally come along this Hart Street, the main thoroughfare. Then, again, even to discover where she lived would be something. And what could be the harm? If one only knew the house, would there not always be the possibility of beholding in the distance a gleam of cool fresh lilac and pale yellow-white that would lend a new wonder to the glory of a June day? And if that were all—well, so be it. Some others were more happy. Even at this moment she might be laughing and telling her friends of the bridal procession, and the children, and the scattering of pansies and marguerites. She had forgotten all about the stranger whom she had so accidentally regarded with her deep-wounding April eyes.

Now when Nan Summers disappeared out of Hart Street, she had merely turned into Bell Street, which is the beginning of the road to Oxford, and thither, after some ten minutes of furious contention with himself, Sidney felt constrained to follow. Yet, when he reached the quiet little thoroughfare, *that* also seemed empty; there was hardly any sign of life, save for the white-tipped martins that kept skimming close to the ground, sometimes even alighting for a moment on the watered roadway, and then rising again into the hot air. But presently he noticed—what he must have known before—that here were several old-fashioned inns, with court-yards and stabling; and now it occurred to him that this wonderful visitor might have come in from a distance, and might have driven away again. It was not so certain, then, that he must needs, sooner or later, find himself face to face with her in Henley. Nevertheless a strange kind of unrest, a sort of desperate hope, kept him wandering on and on, and mostly with his eyes fixed on the furthest distance. Or, again, he would glance furtively at these detached villas and at their windows. He heard voices in the gardens, from amongst the red hawthorns and the laburnums and the rhododendrons; and occasionally he caught sight of figures, but not that one slim symmetrical form that he could have recognised

anywhere. He did not go out into the country. Eventually he retraced his steps, and passed along Bell Street, scanning those old-fashioned hostelryes and their archways and their stable-yards. But all to no purpose. The main thoroughfare of the town he found as empty as ever, though he had some vague heart-sick fancy that she might have occasion to return the way she came. The doors of St. Mary's Church were shut now; most of the scattered marguerites and pansies had been picked up by children and carried away. He went home to get some food, but neither that nor his books appeared to have any interest for him. He was restless, undetermined, incapable of settling to anything; and presently he had set forth again on another aimless exploration of the straggling and garden-closed suburbs of this small town. How long his disquieted wanderings lasted he did not seem to know nor care; but when at length he arrived at the gate of Lilac Lodge, and turned to have a parting look at the sleepily moving river, behold! on the densely foliated heights beyond a solitary golden star here and there told of a house already lit up for the coming night, and the woods were growing dark under the cold metallic gray of the evening sky.

And all the next day this unceasing heart-hunger kept him at his fruitless quest, until, as the hours went helplessly by, it almost seemed as though that must have been really a vision, an illusory enchantment, that he had beheld at the gate of St. Mary's Church. But on the following afternoon fortune befriended him in a most unexpected fashion. He was returning into Henley by the Medmenham road, and was approaching the point where Bell Street curves out towards the Fair Mile, when he saw, a long way ahead of him, two figures, one of whom he instantly recognised by the colours of her dress. And as those two, leaving the town, drew nearer, he made sure he was not mistaken; apparition or no apparition, she was once more within view of his eager eyes that had so long sought in vain. And could anything have exceeded the great good luck of this

encounter, seeing that at the junction of the Medmenham and Oxford roads there is a patch of wooded enclosure, behind which he could easily screen himself while he allowed them to go by? They came along. She seemed more surpassingly beautiful, more radiant, than ever; she was laughing and chatting merrily with her companion—no restraint or fear now in her eyes. This slightly stooping man, with the powerfully built frame, and the grave, quiet face, was no doubt her father; he was mostly listening, in an amused way; he did not talk much. As they passed, Sidney noticed that the man walked rather deliberately, while the girl's step was light and buoyant; and perhaps it was the massive breadth of his shoulders that caused her by contrast to look particularly slight and slim. They continued along the Oxford road, and when they had gone a sufficient distance, Sidney Hume followed. Now he would find out where this wonder of wonders was accustomed to hide herself—perhaps by some lonely upland heath; perhaps in some old grange amidst the silence of the woods.

But Fortune never distributes her favours singly. A most unlooked-for incident now occurred. When father and daughter had left the last of the suburban villas and gardens behind, and were well into the Fair Mile, under the wide-branching and rustling elms, Sidney perceived that there were three navvies coming along from the opposite direction; and as these drew near they paused in a loitering, hesitating sort of way, while one of them addressed the two strangers. Sidney, of course, could only guess what was going on; he held back; he did not wish to be suspected of reconnoitring. Perhaps the three labourers had been in at the Traveller's Rest, and the hot weather was apt to make them thirsty; they might be either frolicsome of mood, or humbly plaintive, or half quarrelsome. At all events, the girl's father, in answer to them, merely shook his head, and would have passed quietly on, giving the three navvies the wider share of the broad

pathway. They allowed him to go by; then they seemed to think better of it, and followed, and plainly intercepted both father and daughter. Sidney quickened his steps. If there was about to be any unpleasantness, would not he arrive at the most opportune moment? Why, never was there such a stroke of luck! Talk of introductions?—here was one ready made! And, as it appeared to him, the labourers had grown distinctly aggressive—they barred the way. It was about time he was on the spot, to make this fight, if there was to be a fight, a little more fair.

But in an instant the whole situation was changed. The girl had interposed herself, doubtless with some frantic hope of appeasing this imminent strife. Sidney could see her hand held up, as if imploring them to desist. Her hurried intervention was of no avail; nay, one of the men, little guessing what danger was lurking near, rudely gripped her by the arm to drag her out of the way. That was the swift ruin of him. The girl's father suddenly made a step forward, slightly raising himself on his left foot; his left fist drove out, and down the man went like a log, lying prone and extended on the highway. Almost simultaneously the right fist was swung round, catching the second of the scoundrels a terrific backhander on the cheek-bone. He also went staggering and rolling, until he stumbled head-long into the dry ditch. The third man, after a moment's pause of blind amazement, turned and fled as if the very devil were at his heels. All this seemed the work of one bewildering second. It happened with such an astonishing rapidity that when Sidney came eagerly running up there was nothing more to be done.

"Shall I catch that fellow for you, sir?" he demanded, quickly. "I'll get hold of him in a minute, if you like." And this was no vain boast on the part of the young man, for as a Freshman he had been a famous flier at the hurdles of the O.U.A.C.

It was Nan Summers who answered him, without even a glance to see who this new-comer was,

"No ; leave him alone," she said, peremptorily. "And get those men taken away !"

She was anxiously clinging to her father, both her hands on his arm, while she scrutinised his face in the strangest fashion. His complexion was a little grayer than usual, that was all ; he did not seem in the least perturbed.

"Dodo, come !" she said, imploringly. "Never mind them—leave them alone—they'll do no further harm."

But he gently put her aside. He stepped over to the man who had rolled into the ditch, caught him by the collar, and dragged him to his knees.

"Quit shamming," said he, briefly—for this rascal held his hand to his head, and moaned and moaned. "You're not hurt. I don't know about this other fellow. You'll have to look after him. Get him along to the Traveller's Rest, and give him a drop of something—unless he's had enough already."

"Ay, he's had enough already, guv'nor," was the whining answer ; "and it ain't gin and it ain't beer he's had enough of, but he's had enough. And my jaw's broken, that's what it is——"

"Rubbish !" said Mr. Summers, taking out a couple of shillings. "Here, this will pay for the beer and the sticking-plaster ; and the next time you and your mates think of playing tricks on strangers, mind you choose the right sort of people."

"If you would like to prosecute these scoundrels, sir," said Sidney, interposing, "I shall be glad to be a witness. I saw the whole affair from the beginning, and I tried to be up in time to help you, but you were not long in settling the matter."

"Oh no ; we'll leave them alone," said Mr. Summers, quietly, seeing that the other man had now in a measure recovered his senses, and was sitting up, staring about him in a limp and dazed way. "They won't forget that little lesson for a while."

"But surely it is monstrous," Sidney continued—and as

Mr. Summers and his daughter were now moving away from the scene of this rapid and conclusive scuffle, it appeared only natural that he should go with them—"it is monstrous that peaceable people, walking along an open highway, should be liable to insult and menace of this kind. However, such a thing very rarely happens; I have known Henley and the districts round it for years, and hardly ever heard of such an occurrence. I hope you won't consider it a common feature of Oxfordshire life——"

"Oh no, not at all," said this sallow-complexioned man with the grave, tranquil face. "My daughter and I have lived some months now in the neighbourhood, and found it particularly quiet, and the people well-behaved."

"Oh, you know the neighbourhood, then?" Sidney said, with skilful promptitude. "Then you know how beautiful it is, especially in the lonelier parts, away from the main roads?"

"We are finding out day by day, just as we happen to have leisure," Mr. Summers answered, and presently the talk of the two men was all about heaths and woods and lanes, about Stonor Park and Rotherfield Greys, about Highmore Cross and Witheridge Hill, and about the long drive through the beech woods that crown the lofty land lying between Bix and Nettlebed.

And meanwhile what of Nan Summers? Well, from the moment she discovered who this was who had come to offer them assistance, she had betrayed the most inexplicable embarrassment, and even alarm, insomuch that Sidney himself could not but become conscious of it. She would not enter into their conversation; she would not even look his way; she seemed to hide herself from him, on the other side of her father. All the happy audacity of mirth and high spirits he had beheld in her face as those two were coming out from Henley had departed; there was nothing but constraint there now. She walked on in silence; and when she lifted her eyes from the ground, it was not in his direction—it was in any other direction.

What was the reason of this marvellous change ? he asked himself. Surely the agitation produced by that brief scuffle could not so profoundly have affected her. In point of fact, she had shown no fear at all ; it was about her father that she had betrayed anxiety, especially after the two men had been thrown aside from him like a couple of ninepins. On the other hand, was it possible that the little occurrence at the gate of St. Mary's Church still dwelt in her mind, causing her deep-lying mortification ? But it was hardly credible that she should place so much importance on so trifling an incident, unless she was of an extraordinary sensitiveness that he could in no wise understand.

And so they walked on ; and Mr. Summers seemed to have formed a great liking for this young stranger, whose personal charm of manner, when he chose to exert it, to say nothing of his good looks, had always made it easy for him to win friends. Sidney, on his part, strove scrupulously to preserve that gulf of distance between himself and the young lady which she appeared to have established. She might have been non-existent so far as his rapid and discursive talk was concerned, though to him it was an altogether miraculous thing that she should be only a few feet away, and consciously listening. Only once was she dragged into the conversation, and that was none of his doing. Her father was describing a certain stretch of highway they had discovered on the heights between Crowhurst and Bix Turnpike ; and he said that this remote thoroughfare, with its strips of common on each side, was hardly ever used ; it was a kind of no-man's-land.

"I have even thought of taking possession of it, in the name of my daughter here," he went on, in a half-jesting way ; "only I suppose I should want a banner and a sword, and perhaps some cannon to fire. And, indeed, her new kingdom, I'm afraid, would only bring her trouble. For there's an extraordinary lot of wild flowers about the hedgerows ; and latterly, as if she hadn't enough to do with the seeds and plants and slips in the garden, she has taken to

the out-of-door flowers as well, with all kinds of botanical books. I can't help her, of course; I don't know about such things; and when she is trying to find out the name of a new flower, the scientific descriptions appear so difficult, and so like one another——"

"Oh, but that is the simplest thing in the world," Sidney said at once. "All that is necessary is to get an old-fashioned Flora—either one based on the Linnæan system, or one with the Linnæan system as an appendix, to be used as a key. That is by far the easiest way of finding out the name of a plant," he went on, overjoyed to have the chance of talking about anything, so long as it furnished an excuse for his continuing to accompany them. "Of course the natural classification that is generally adopted nowadays is the more reasonable; but the beginner wants first of all to discover what these flowers and plants are, and the Linnæan system makes so easy and simple a key——"

"Do you hear that, Nan?" her father said, turning to her.

This unexpected question visibly disconcerted her, but she managed to murmur something in reply: her eyes were still fixed on the ground. As for Sidney, he was almost on the point of desperately breaking this spell of silence. As it happened, botany had been one of the hobbies of his boyhood; he still retained a sufficient recollection of the commoner genera and species to be met with along the hedge-rows or in the woods; and why, he asked himself, in this wild chaos of daring hopes and desires—why should she not in her troubles and difficulties come to him direct? Surely that would be an idyllic employment for a calm summer evening, up on the silent, high-lying, sunset-warmed heaths and commons, with the valleys below sinking to sleep in the gathering mists, and with a gradual softening of all distant sounds. Would she bring to him some imagined rarity, holding it up in her small white fingers, her eyes turned towards his? Nay—so rapidly did this or that fancy shoot like a swift-darting shuttle through

the warp and woof of his actual and eager conversation—he was at this moment wondering which of all the flowers in garden or wildwood was nearest to the colour of those hidden eyes. The forget-me-not?—too cold and opaque. The lobelia?—too blackish-blue. The germander-speed-well?—that was something nearer it—tender and springlike—clear and yet deep—with some strange power of appeal, some power of saying mystical, unsearchable things. And why should those beautiful lucent eyes be so rigorously turned away from him? He had done nothing to cause her fear.

He knew not how long he walked with them; he clung to this surprising chance that had so happily befallen. Nor even yet had the amazing good fortune of this young man come to an end. When the three of them arrived opposite a certain white gate, Nan paused, stopped, and then turned aside, her eyes still downcast; but her father hesitated for a second.

“I have got an Ordnance Survey map of the neighbourhood,” he said to the young stranger. “If you wouldn’t mind stepping in for a moment, you might show me the whereabouts of some of those places you mentioned: they would be easier to remember when you have once seen them.”

“Oh, I shall be delighted!” said Sidney, asking himself what was going to happen to him next. He had not only discovered where that rarely beautiful creature lived; he was now being invited to enter the house. It seemed all too marvellous to be real.

And yet he was careful not to presume. He went no farther than the hall; for it was in the hall that the large map, pieced together, hung; and soon, with the aid of a pocket-pencil, he was pointing out lines of highway and explaining. The young lady had disappeared; but presently she returned, and she brought with her a bottle and a small liqueur-glass.

“Dodo,” she said to her father, in an undertone,

He turned to see what she wanted.

"No, no, Nan," he said, gently. "I am perfectly well."

"But are you sure?" she said, regarding his face with a curiously earnest look.

"Perfectly—perfectly," he answered her. "You mustn't be put out by such a trifle, Nan."

So she went away again, and that was the last that Sidney saw of her at this time; for she did not even come back to bid him good-bye. And presently he took his leave, and got away from this enchanted dwelling on the lonely uplands, and was making his way back to Henley through the beech woods. But in truth he was not exultant over this rare good fortune that had happened to him; rather he was anxious and disturbed, his heart and brain alike bewildered and sick and ill at ease. He did not quite know the meaning of all that had occurred, nor could he guess at its consequences; it seemed to him that he had been 'in a hollow land'; that he had beheld strange things; that he had been all too near to 'Nycheia, with her April eyes.'

But as for Nan Summers, all this evening—now that the stranger had gone—she was in a particularly affectionate mood, and light-hearted and merry, except at rare intervals, when she would sink into a profound reverie, from which again she would almost instantly rouse herself.

"It will be a splendid story to tell Mr. Erridge," said she at dinner, and now she was laughing over that adventure of the afternoon. "It will delight him. How he will wish he had been there!"

"It is nothing to speak about, Nan," said her father. "Only there are two men in Henley who are a little wiser this evening."

"Three, Dodo, three," she said. "The one who ran away was even more frightened than the others; and I almost wish we had allowed the—the young gentleman to run after him and catch him and bring him back. I should

like to have seen that one also sorry—and hoping you wouldn't be hard on him."

"No, no, Nan : it is better to let things pass quietly," her father said. It was a familiar phrase of his.

Then again, after dinner, when they were strolling through the adjacent plantation, and she was nestling close to his side, she said :

"Do you know, Dodo, I am very glad now that you met with those three insolent rascals, though I was terribly frightened at the time about the effect it might have on you. It has had no effect at all—not the slightest. And I have been convincing myself that the doctors were altogether wrong about you. The vicar used to say that they were always making mistakes about heart-disease—frightening people unnecessarily—sometimes making some poor man or woman who was quite well live in a kind of slavery for years and years. And look at you, Dodo. You have a quarrel thrust on you ; you have to face three men—three of them at once, and threatening ; you send one of them spinning this way, and another one rolling that—oh, I wish Mr. Erridge could have seen it !—and then you walk quietly on as if nothing had happened ; and when you come home you won't even take the little glass of brandy that I offer you ! Dodo, there's not much of the invalid about you, that I'm sure of."

He laughed at her gay courage. "It matters very little, Nan," he said. "I don't think I live in any fear : one must die of something. And I am all the more unconcerned now that I have got you a home of your own ; and if you had only a few companions——"

"Dodo, I wish for no companions," she said, quite earnestly. "For you and me to be by ourselves—that is what I wish for, always and always. Of course I am very glad when Mr. Erridge drives down, for he can talk to you about things I don't understand, and he is very cheerful and amusing, even when he is not aware of it. But as for companions—well, when you

get tired of me, Dodo, I will go and see if I can find some companions."

Then, when they had gone in-doors, and had the lamps lit, and when she had brought him his pipe, and taken a seat at his feet, with a book in her hand from which to read aloud to him, she did not begin at once. It was the *Lays of Ancient Rome* she had brought—"Horatius," "Virginia," "The Battle of the Lake Regillus," were great favourites of his; but the volume remained unopened, and her eyes were thoughtful and absent.

"Well, Nan?" he said.

She seemed to start out of some dream. "Yes, Dodo," she answered. "I've read up about Henry of Navarre, and I can tell you all about him, and then we can go back to the Ivry ballad. You like that about as well as any of them, don't you?" But she did not proceed with her historical lecture. The book lay unheeded in her lap. Presently she said, with downcast eyes, "About—about that young gentleman who was here this afternoon, Dodo: if you should meet him in Henley, what do you mean to do?"

"How?"

"Well, would you speak to him?" she asked, with some hesitation.

"If he spoke to me, yes," her father made answer. "I don't seek to make acquaintances, as you know, Nan; but if any one chooses to speak to me, I must be civil."

"You don't even know his name," she said, beating about the bush.

"That is a small matter."

And then, in the desperation of her embarrassment, she managed to raise her eyes, which were almost piteous.

"But it's different with you, Dodo," she exclaimed. "If I were to meet him—if I were alone—what must I do? He has been in this house; and he has talked to you for a long time, while he was walking with us; but I do not know him: to me he is a perfect stranger. And suppose I

were to be coming out of a shop—and he chanced to be passing——”

“Well, he seems very friendly : if he stopped to say a few words, you could but answer,” her father said.

“Talk to a stranger?—what would he think of me !” she exclaimed again, almost with indignation.

“Or perhaps he would only take off his hat to you, and pass on,” her father suggested. “Surely you know about such things better than I do.”

She lowered her eyes ; and she was silent for a second or two. When she spoke, it was very slowly :

“Don’t you think, Dodo—it would be better—if both you and I—were to treat him quite as a stranger—that is, if we should ever meet him again ?”

“As you please, Nan, just as you please,” he responded at once. He could deny her nothing ; and in his eyes she was always in the right. “He seemed very friendly and good-natured. But just as you please. You know about such things better than I do. I have never been anxious to make any new acquaintances, so long as you are content with this solitary life : if that is enough for you, it is enough for me.”

And thus it was that these two—the one actuated by a vague, inexplicable alarm and foreboding, the other desirous only of meeting her wishes, and heedful of naught else—resolved upon holding this young man a stranger to them both. But the Fates were otherwise minded.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN GLAMOUR LAND.

“ABOVE all, be sane,” Sidney Hume had kept repeating to himself only a day or two before. But now the bewilderment of this girl’s beauty had driven every consideration of prudence out of his head. He did not stay to ask who she

was ; he did not stay to ask who or what her father might be, or might have been. Probably he would have said that he already knew all he wanted to know. The girl herself had told him what she was in that inadvertent moment when she allowed a stranger to look into the windows of her soul : he had beheld the purity, the sweetness, the light-heartedness, the beneficent kindness dwelling there. As for her father—well, the prompt and effective fashion in which he had bowled over the two navvies on the Oxford Road was a thing that commanded Sidney's entire approval. It was an unusual accomplishment to possess, no doubt. Perhaps he had been the owner of some semi-private gymnasium ; perhaps he had been a teacher of athletics ; it mattered little. What was of immediate concern to this young man was the actual position and circumstances in which these two were now placed ; and he could not but think that the life they appeared to live, from his brief glimpse of it, was a very beautiful, simple, and natural life, far apart from the mean ambitions and jealousies and frivolities of fashion—a life wholesome and inoffensive, and marked by a rare affection that even the most casual stranger could not fail to perceive. An ideal household it seemed to him, in its modest retirement, harming no one, content within itself, amid the silence and solitude of the Oxfordshire beech woods.

And having been once admitted into this sacred retreat, a relentless longing arose within him to return thither—a longing that became imperative ; he was drawn by cords stronger than any ropes of steel. The only difficulty was to discover some excuse—even of the wildest ; the sleepless hours of the next morning found him still ransacking his brain. There was, it is true, the superseded Flora with its Linnæan key of which he had told them ; he could carry that out to Crowhurst, and ring at the door, and leave it for them ; but that was about all ; and the thought of coming away unsatisfied was misery. Then a sudden fancy struck him : apparently she had got no great length

with her botanical studies ; her father and she had but recently come to this neighbourhood ; perhaps they had never heard of Wargrave Marsh and its wild snowflakes ? And why should he wait till the afternoon ? People in the country took their walks abroad at all hours. Indeed, why should even a minute be sacrificed ? If there was any dawdling, by the time he reached Crowhurst father and daughter might have gone out for the day.

And so, as soon as he had got dressed, he hauled on a pair of half-length fishing-boots ; he walked quickly along to the bridge, and hired a light little skiff ; and presently he was pulling up stream with the long and steady swing of a practised oarsman. He had pretty well all the river to himself at this early hour, and had not to pay much attention ; but when he had got up to Boulney Court, he held over to the opposite bank, and there, moderating his pace, he began to scrutinise attentively the wilderness of swampy weed and underwood that is known as Wargrave Marsh. At first his search was fruitless ; for the flowering month of the *Leucojum æstivum* is May, and this was the first week in June ; but eventually, when he had driven the bow of the boat ashore, and when he had hunted about through the spongy morass, he came upon the long leaves and white blossoms of the plant he wanted ; and, securing a sufficient quantity, he made his way back to the skiff. Then down with the current again to Henley ; a hurried breakfast ; a hunt for the shabby old Flora ; and presently, with eager and impatient stride, he was leaving the town on his way to Crowhurst among the woods.

It was a vivid and brilliant morning, as became the young summer-time ; a universal trilling of larks filled all the silver spaces of the sky ; there was a soft kurrooing of wood-pigeons ; the tall hedges were powdered white with hawthorn ; the swelling uplands were green with corn ; the rounded summits of the elms were dark against the deep blue of the heavens. A morning of impetuous hope, surely, and audacious forecast ; a morning full of life and quick-

glancing interest ; sportive and joyous, too. A whirlwind that caught up a column of dust from the yellow road and carried it along the highway was only playing, as it were, in order to cool the hot air. It was going to be a day of moving shadows and sudden shafts of sunlight ; but the sunlight, he knew, would predominate ; already the great mass of the variegated landscape lay basking in the golden warmth.

As he was nearing Crowhurst he espied an old man tinkering at a dilapidated fence.

"What is the name of that house—can you tell me ?" he asked.

"That be Crowhurst," said the ancient gaffer, in a strong Buckinghamshire accent, as he paused from his work. "It wur Crowhurst farm a' one time ; but it bain't a farm-house any mower."

"And who lives in it ?"

"Why, Mahster Zummers—Mahster Zummers and his dahter."

"Thank you ;" and the young man passed on.

He had already heard her father call her Nan ; Anne Summers she was, then ?—not an unusual name, perhaps, but it would soon become magical and wonderful enough when associated with her. Then came the necessity of letting these new friends know what his own name was ; and for that he had provided a simple stratagem. When he reached the house and rang the bell, and when the smart little maid-servant presented herself, he held a card in his hand. He asked if Mr. Summers was at home, and was answered in the affirmative.

"Will you give him this card, then," he said, "and tell him I should like to see him for a few moments ?"

The appearance of this young gentleman seemed to inspire confidence. She instantly and politely invited him to enter ; and he, following, was forthwith shown into the drawing-room. There he was left alone for a second or two, looking around him with the keenest interest. He guessed what feminine hand was visible in the floral decora-

tion, if that can be called floral which chiefly consisted of sprays of young beech.

The sun was hot without ; here, in a soft twilight, the tender yellowish-green of those beech leaves was singularly fresh and cool.

And then Mr. Summers appeared, seemingly not in the least astonished to find who his visitor was ; nay, there was quite a friendly look in his grave, submissive eyes.

“I have brought you the Flora I spoke of yesterday,” said Sidney, in his usual simple and straightforward way, “and if Miss Summers will accept the loan of it she will find the Linnæan synopsis very handy and easy to manage. And as I thought she might not be familiar with the snow-flake—it is rather a rarity growing wild—I’ve put one or two in this box. She ought to know what to look for when she comes down to the river.”

“Thank you, thank you,” said Mr. Summers. “But won’t you come and explain to herself?—I don’t understand about such things. Nan is in the garden——”

“Then I will take the book with me,” said the young man, needing no second invitation ; and thereupon, but perhaps with a trifle more of perturbation than he cared to show, he followed his guide into the open air.

Out here there was a blaze and dazzlement of colour and sunlight—scarlet geraniums, white geraniums, blue lobelias, gorgeous peonies bursting in crimson from their thick green shell, forget-me-nots, petunias, pansies—and in the midst of it all stood a young girl in cool summer costume, who wore gardening gloves and a straw hat, and who carried a watering-can in her hand. But she was not at work at the moment ; she was chatting to the old Scotch gardener, who was pottering away at some sheltered nasturtiums ; and as she was quite unaware of the approach of the new-comers, her talk was unconstrained and blithe enough. Occasionally she turned to water a plant that chanced to be in shadow ; but for the most part she was idly and merrily chattering to the old man.

“Nan !” her father called.

She instantly turned, and a swift colour sprang to her face on recognising this visitor ; but when, without hesitation, he went forward to her, and modestly made some excuse, and explained his object in thus calling upon them, her embarrassment insensibly departed, and she found herself listening unreservedly and even with gratitude to what this handsome lad had to say. His voice was quiet and reassuring ; his manner was frank and natural ; his eyes were honest—there was no trace of pretence or hypocrisy in them. It is true that when she removed her gloves in order to take the open book into her hands, the small plump white fingers were slightly tremulous ; but that was only for a second ; and probably she herself did not know how easily she fell into the way of answering him and questioning him, and thanking him with her eyes as well as with her speech. She was an apt pupil and a willing one, though he disclaimed having anything but the most amateurish knowledge of the subject. Then he opened the tin box he had brought with him and gave her the snowflakes ; and still further she expressed, both by word and look, her gratitude. And now it was time for him to be gone ; his mission was accomplished.

There was a moment of embarrassment. It was she who interposed.

“You were speaking of the columbine,” she said, adroitly. “We have some beautiful ones just now. Won’t you come and look at them ? I think some of the cottage-garden flowers are as pretty as any.”

She led the way, and the next minute he was regarding the slender and graceful plants, with their pendulous blossoms of various hues—blue-black, rose-purple, rose, and waxen white. And from that starting-point the rest was easy. She took him leisurely round the garden, showing him what they had done and what they meant to do, and all her timidity seemed to have fled. She was talking to him lightly, naturally, and with the most musical and magnetic voice he had ever heard. An amazing experience truly, to

be in this solitary world of beautiful, basking, and glowing things, with sweet scents wafted about by the warm wind, and the distant landscape—wooded hills shimmering green in the sunlight—lying remote and silent, as if it belonged to another universe altogether; while this rare creature revealed still another charm—a voice that seemed to thrill his very heart-strings with its soft melodious tones! Once or twice she laughed as she turned to make some remark to her father, and there was a gleam of perfect teeth between the parted lips. Her face was mostly in shadow, under the straw hat, but her eyes were full of light. And there was no fear in them now. Her companion asked himself how he had ever managed to startle away the gladness and natural gaiety and content that seemed to dwell habitually there.

“Nan,” said her father at length, “you must not take up too much of Mr. Hume’s time, proud as you are of your garden.”

“But it is I who must apologise,” the young man said, “for calling at such an hour. Of course you have all your day’s occupations before you. So I’m afraid I must bid you good-morning.”

But again it was Nan Summers who interposed. It seemed a pity he should go away in this fashion. He had shown himself so modest and pleasant-mannered, she would not have him hurry away.

“Are you—are you going back to Henley?” she asked, with a certain shyness.

“Oh yes,” he answered her, with a look of inquiry.

“Because,” said she—“because my father and I will be walking in quite shortly; in a few minutes we shall be starting.”

She could not, in maiden bashfulness, say more; but surely this was enough. And Sidney promptly seized the opportunity. “If you wouldn’t mind,” he said, “if I am not in the way, I should like to wait and walk in with you.”

The quick unguarded look in her eyes revealed what she

herself would have answered to this proposal, but she mutely turned to her father.

"Why not?" said he. He could read her wishes in her face, and for him that was sufficient. "I am sorry I cannot drive you in. I have sent away our trap to get an alteration made in it. But a walk will be pleasant enough on so fine a morning."

"Yes, indeed," said this lucky young man, before whom an entrancing prospect had just been opened at the very moment when he thought the gates of Paradise were about to be closed on him.

And meanwhile Nan had sped away to make some change in her attire; and when she reappeared the straw hat had been discarded for something of a more young-ladyish kind, while her costume generally bore evidences of attention and care. Then they left the house together, and passed along the lane, and, under her guidance, entered a beech wood, where the soft carpet of coppery leaves, the legacy of the previous autumn, was not yet quite hidden by the young grass and the half-uncurled fronds of the bracken. It was very still and quiet in this wood; their footfalls sounded strangely. Sometimes a sigh of wind would stir the topmost branches with a moan as of some distant sea; then again peace and silence, save for the light crackling tread as they walked. There was a shadowed twilight in here, but far away through the tall stems they could see a warmer glow, the glow of the shining world without.

"I hear you are very proud of your garden," he said to her amid their multifarious light-hearted talk, "I suppose it keeps you quite busy."

"And a very good thing too," her father put in, in his mild way. "For, you see, she has been quietly brought up, and she has few friends and hardly any acquaintances; and if she were not kept interested by her gardening, I'm afraid it might be rather dull for her at Crowhurst."

"Dull, Dodo?" she exclaimed. "I haven't time to be dull. It isn't only helping old John in the garden, it's a

hundred different things. And here is another ;” for they had come to some wide patches of woodruff—innumerable small white stars set in tiny green whorls of leaves. “I must have whole armfuls of that woodruff gathered to sweeten the cupboards and the linen-chests.”

And then Sidney, eager to join in on any excuse, must needs tell her of the why and wherefore of the name—woodreeve—waldmeister ; from which it was but a step to the other herbs that increased in fragrance after they were cut and dried ; and these again led on to the mysterious plant that looks so innocent in dell or dingle, but when transferred to the herbarium discloses all sorts of jet-black imps and hobgoblins on the blue sheet. At random, unreservedly, with quick and happy give and take, they talked of every haphazard thing that presented itself. Though for the most part Mr. Summers listened, he seemed pleased to see his daughter in such high spirits. Whenever his eyes were turned in her direction they grew soft and kind.

Then the ferns and the woodruff gave place to briers, which dragged at her dress, so that she was forced to return to the highway. And here they came again in sight of the wider landscape—upland fields and hedges dappled with sunlight and shadow ; the slow moving arms of a wind-mill on the high sky-line ; far away in the east softly wooded hills, with one solitary white mansion set amongst the shimmering sunny green. None the less was it a changeable, indeterminate sort of day. As they continued on—Sidney thinking only of the bewitching music of this girl’s voice, and the fascination of her careless laughter, and even the inexplicable charm of the light and free fashion in which she walked—they became aware of a curious darkness all around. It broadened out. The green of the fields near them became livid and intense. Overhead a pall of sombre purple had slowly gathered itself together in the midst of the noonday heat ; there was a weight of menace in the louring sky. And at last came one or two heavy drops of rain,

"There may be a shower," Mr. Summers said ; " we'd better wait for a bit under those elms."

And so they left the highway, and went and stood under the spreading branches of one of the largest of the trees, close by the rugged trunk. As for Sidney, this was but another godsend, another marvellous stroke of good fortune ; there was to be some little addition to those priceless minutes that had been all too surely slipping away. What did he care if the surrounding landscape grew black as night, so long as all the sunshine of the world was near to him—in those stray waifs of golden-brown hair that clustered around her neck and ears ? This overshadowing gloom was the welcomest thing that could happen ; it kept her almost within touch of him ; he could detect some slight perfume from the silk ribbons of her bonnet. With her parasol, or with the timid toe of her boot, she toyed with the scant spears of grass ; he could watch the out-curving lashes that hid the too eloquent eyes. And when she laughed, it was a quiet sort of laughter ; she rarely looked up.

But this happy imprisonment was not to last. By-and-by there was a perceptible lightening of that brooding darkness ; there came a brisker stirring of wind ; the fields and spinneys began to resume their natural colour. Presently, as they still lingered to make sure, a dazzling gleam of blue and silver overhead, through the topmost branches of the elms, told them that the threatening storm-cloud was peacefully passing over ; and as they stepped out into the road a glory of sunshine fell around them, and oak and ash and hawthorn hedge, with the golden buttercups among the grass, were all rustling and swaying and nodding in the cheerful warmth.

But what particularly struck Sidney, even amidst the bewilderment of these rare opportunities and this light and joyous talk, was the studious way in which the girl's father kept himself in the background. This powerfully built man, with his quiet demeanour and patient eyes,

seemed to have not one atom of self-assertion ; he appeared never to think about himself at all ; his care was solely lavished upon his daughter, and that in a singularly humble and wistful way. He almost seemed to treat her with deference, as if she were some superior being, so abject was his affection. If he saw her smiling and interested, he did not seek to join in the conversation at all. When he looked to make sure that the storm-cloud had passed over, it was on her account, not his own. When he was appealed to about any projected excursion or the like, it was to his daughter's face that he instinctively turned to learn whether he was to say yes or no. It was an unusual attitude of father towards child ; but not less remarkable was the fact that it had resulted in no sort or kind of spoiling. The girl appeared to return his devotion a hundred times over ; some little touch or caress now and again told of the confidence and trust between them ; and if he were given to an unnecessary diffidence and self-effacement, that was not in the least with her consent or approval, for she lost no chance of belauding him and proclaiming her faith in him. All this position of affairs was clear enough to Sidney Hume, and he was not slow to take advantage of it—in his present desperate need.

For they had now reached the top of Gravel Hill, and were about to descend into Henley ; and he was distractedly conscious that in a few minutes he would be saying good-bye to them, without any distinct assurance as to their meeting again. And so, as it were by accident, but really with some wild incoherent purpose, he recalled her father's exploit of the day before in the Fair Mile, and praised it highly, and made much of it, and said how people had always admired feats of physical strength and skill ; how the natural man loved fighting ; how the Greeks had glorified boxing and wrestling ; how even a king's son had stepped into the ring at the funeral games of Patroklos. To all this she listened with great favour, and even with some little air of triumph. He could see

how pleased she was. She glanced over to her father as if to say, "Do you hear that, Dodo?" But the young man, in rapid furtherance of his own daring schemes, went on to speak of the tendency in the popular mind to transform heroic deeds into myths, and he wondered whether the tusks shown in Rome were really those of the boar killed by Meleager. Now it is surely a far cry from knocking over two navvies in the Oxford Road to the hunting of the wild boar in Calydon: but there are rivers in Macedon and Monmouth, and on this occasion the connection served, for he proceeded to remark, in a casual kind of manner,

"One would like to know what kind of beast it really was that St. George slew over there in Berkshire."

"In Berkshire? St. George?" she asked, with puzzled eyes.

"Yes," he answered her straightway. "Haven't you heard of Dragon Hill, near by Uffington, where St. George slew the ravenous beast? Oh, but you must certainly drive over there. Well, it might be too far to drive there and back in one day, but you could easily go by rail to some neighbouring town, and then hire a trap. Wantage, for example—why, surely you ought to see the birthplace of King Alfred; and then there is the great white horse cut on the hill-side to commemorate the battle of Ashdown—all close by. Supposing, now, I were to plan out an excursion, would you let me be your guide for the day?"

So this was what he had been occultly driving at by means of Euryalos, and Meleager, and the bacon saint? And for a second of suspense her answer seemed doubtful. It was a bold thing for him to ask and for her to grant, seeing how short-lived had been their knowledge of each other. But then his praise of her father's strength and skill had left her in a grateful mood; and if the request was audacious, the manner of making it was modest enough; and perhaps, she may have thought, as for a

moment she regarded his supplicating eyes, a refusal might appear a little hard-hearted. So she turned to her father.

"What do you say, Dodo?"

"Well, would you like it, Nan?" he made answer with his invariable deference to her own inclination. "Just what you would like, you know. You deserve a holiday from your housekeeping. And it might make a little break. You must not let Crowhurst become monotonous; that would never do."

Then she turned again to Sidney.

"Are you sure it would not be taking up too much of your time?"

"Oh! I shall be delighted," he exclaimed, joyfully. "And I will make all the necessary inquiries, and will find out what the best plan will be. Then I will come out to Crowhurst, and you can fix whichever day you may think will suit."

"It is so very kind of you," she said; and the speedwell eyes, grown brave for a second, also conveyed to him her thanks, and perhaps something more, now that she was about to bid him farewell. For they had come to the corner of Bell Street, and there was no longer any excuse for his lingering in their society.

But this was no tragic parting, no hopeless and irrevocable good-bye. Even as he mutely pressed her hand, and had his last glimpse of her downcast face, rose-tinted, radiant, bashful, he knew that there were to be more of those clear-shining June mornings, in a wonderland of flowers and scents and sunlit colours, with the young queen of all these beautiful things, herself more beautiful than any of them, no longer possessed of any dread of him, but bland, complaisant, with kindness and gratitude in her lucent eyes.

Nevertheless, on this afternoon and evening, being left all to himself and his own forecasts and imaginings, he fell into a curiously morbid and disquieted and restless mood. His mind was filled with vague apprehensions, formless and

unreasoned things, shapeless phantoms that seemed to threaten him out of the future. There was no rejoicing in that he had so far established a certain relationship with this beautiful friend; he longed for more; he longed for some assurance of the permanence of that relationship; he longed to be near her, to know that she had not already quite forgotten. By this time she would be back at Crowhurst; and it was with a dull inexplicable pain that he thought of the distance that lay between him and her, and of the possibility of her attention being given to this or that in which he had no concern. If she had forgotten, he had not; with the most extraordinary vividness he could recall every feature and incident of that enchanted morning walk—the joyous stroll through the beech wood, the black cloud gathering in the blue and white, their halt under the elm, her moving the blades of grass with her small out-peeping foot, her shadowed face and exquisite profile. And quite clearly—in this river-side silence that was only broken by the clink and clank of some belated boat or by the distant laughter of some girls going home—he could recall the magical sound of her voice, with certain peculiarities that had for him an irresistible fascination. For example, she slightly lengthened the diphthong in such words as *town*, *now*, *out*, *abound*, and this was to him like music. He had never heard any one speak quite in this manner before, and his heart thrilled in response. It was only an additional wonder in this incomparable creature that seemed to consist of wonders—of smiles that were like sunlight, and glances that all unwittingly struck mereiless and deep.

Walking up and down in the twilight, as the river gradually became deserted, and here and there the golden star of a gas-lamp glimmered through the green foliage, he thought he might as well take out and read more carefully a letter he had received that afternoon from London. It was Mrs. Hume who was the writer, and she was inclined to be angry in her remonstrances. Lady Helen—dearest

Helen, rather—had more than once expressed surprise over his absence ; and no wonder. Were there not books enough in the British Museum, or at the London Library ? The season was in full swing, a brilliant round of festivities ; everybody meeting everybody, and going everywhere. Why should he immure himself in the country ? The Greeks had had their day.

Well, this reference to his favourite studies for a moment recalled to his mind the Dionysiac folk whom he had left lone-wandering in those hollow centuries that are all so silent now. But they seemed remote and voiceless—shadows that hardly concerned him ; whereas the actual and living world around him had suddenly become filled with the strangest and wildest possibilities ; and he himself was being racked and rent by conflicting agitations—a passionate and unappeasable longing and heart-hunger ; forebodings, misgivings, that were terrible in their very vagueness ; then, again, bewildering hopes and masterful grapplings with fate and circumstance outrunning all reason and limit ; and these, again, in agonising recoil, succeeded by a poignant and hopeless sense of the unattainable that was at times near akin to despair.

CHAPTER IX.

“ALL A WONDER AND A WILD DESIRE.”

SHE was seated in the garden ; a book lay open on her lap ; her face was in shadow, save for the soft suffusion of light reflected upwards from the masses of flowers aglow in the sun ; her eyes were plunged in a profound reverie. It was not a common mood with Nan Summers, who was naturally gay of heart ; nor had it escaped the ever-watchful observation of her father. On this occasion he came along the garden path in a casual kind of way, as if he were chiefly occupied with the peonies, the columbine and larkspur, the

geraniums, and none-so-pretty, and white Canterbury-bells ; and when he spoke to her he was careful to hide his vague anxiety.

"Nan," said he, "you must really give that book back to Mr. Hume. I am afraid it is too difficult for you. I have noticed once or twice that when you begin to study it, you fall into long thinking fits ; and that's not like you, Nan ; that's not to be allowed at all. You must not lose your high spirits, you know ; you were always splendid for that ; your eyes must be kept laughing—not troubled by any book. If you are really puzzled about any of those wild flowers, I will get somebody down from London ; it would not cost so much to get a teacher down from London for a week or two ; and then you could let Mr. Hume have his book back."

Now on his approach she had hastily shut the volume that lay on her knee ; then she seemed ashamed of that instinctive action ; she opened the *Flora* again ; and when she addressed her father, it was with brave eyes—though there was some touch of conscious colour in her forehead.

"To tell you the truth, Dodo," she said, "I was thinking the same thing, though for a different reason. Mr. Hume must have forgotten what was in this book ; I suppose it is some years since he carried it about with him, among the Cumberland and Westmoreland hills ; and he appears to have jotted down anything that came into his head—different phrases of translation, as if he were trying which was the best ; and these are from the Greek—so much I know, for there are references to 'Artemis and the broad-bosomed Athene,' and Arethusa that was changed into the fountain. Then there are pencillings of flowers on the margins, and bits of mountain or lake scenery on the half-pages ; I should say the book had been a constant companion of his boyish or youthful ramblings ; and it is almost like a diary, that no stranger has the right to look into." And yet she kept turning over the leaves, in a wistful manner. She stopped at a page. "That is the

water-lobelia," she said, with an interest she could not quite conceal, "that grows up from the bottom of lakes: don't you think it is a clever piece of drawing, Dodo? And the outline along the top—I suppose that is the mountain range: it must be a precious volume to him, to have so many memories. Oh, here is another one I happened on—a sketch of High Force in Teesdale: and he has underlined the 'very rare' of the plant he found there: no doubt he was proud enough. '*Polygala nigrifolia*: *very rare*, margins of rills, High Force and Cronkley Fell, Teesdale, altitude 1800 feet.' It looks as if he must have been rather solitary in his wanderings: doesn't it, Dodo?—perhaps they were vacation weeks—reading tours, you know; and if he was interested in rare plants, he would go away by himself. But I don't feel as if it were quite right for me to look. You learn too much—about what he was thinking, when he was alone. And perhaps he doesn't remember. If he did remember, he would hardly give the book to me: would he, Dodo? Oh, there is such a beautiful description of Helen of Troy—I don't know where it comes from—but fancy a lad away for a holiday, and lying amongst the heather on a hill-side, pencilling out a translation for his amusement: that's not the way of most youths. Perhaps he was thinking of publishing something; and these were merely trials of different phrases. Only he need not have put some of the memoranda in Greek characters; that's not playing fair; that's hiding. And there's such a clever drawing of a terrier, barking, with its fore paws thrust out: he must have seen it—it must be a sketch from life—somewhere near the end it is——"

But her father interposed. "You have studied enough for one morning, Nan," he said, in his gentle way. "Put aside the book. I want you to come for a little walk with me; there is a letter that concerns you, and I haven't told you about it until I could consider a bit. No, no," he added, instantly, seeing that there was some look of alarm in her face. "It is nothing serious; nothing very serious,

that is. It is merely a matter for your own judgment; and you have such wonderful tact and discretion; you hit such fine reasons. So we will go for a little stroll, Bix way, and there will be no one to interrupt or overhear."

If it was solitude and silence they desired, they got it directly; for they had left the house but a few minutes when they entered upon a long stretch of secluded highway, bounded on each side by a strip of common and by tall wide-straggling hedges which were all bestarred with the more familiar wild flowers that Nan had got to know—stitchwort, speedwell, white dead-nettle, yellow dead-nettle, crane's-bill, self-heal, forget-me-not, and the like. Indeed, it was a favourite resort of hers, for it was entirely unfrequented; while the views from it were spacious and varied—up-lying fields of young wheat trembling a silver-gray in the light stirring of the wind; meadows, golden with buttercups, dipping down into hollows where the red and white cattle stood basking out in the heat, or a lazier horse sought the shadow of a friendly elm; the further heights showing interweaving lines of copse and spinney until these faded away into the pellucid air of the horizon. As for the silence, a cuckoo calling from some distant wood seemed aggressively loud; when a plover chanced to go by overhead, as they watched its erratic flight they could detect the slight silken whistle of its wings.

"Oh, yes, Nan," her father said, cheerfully, "it is a very pretty neighbourhood; and I don't wonder you have grown fond of it; and so far I am glad that the little experiment I made when I took you away from the vicarage turned out all right. So far it did very well; but then, you see, Nan, there are always other possibilities that have to be faced; it's the way of the world; and there is no use shutting one's eyes. Crowhurst was very well for a time——"

She suddenly stopped; and she had grown very pale.

"Dodo," she said, "are you going to send me away from

you? Are you going to break up our beautiful home?" And then she went on in passionate and piteous accents that he strove in vain to interrupt: "Oh, I was afraid of it all the time! I knew I was not doing well—and I knew you would not tell me what was amiss, for you were always so kind to me! But if you had told me, I would have tried to do better—anything—anything rather than to be sent away from you——"

She hurst into a frantic fit of sobbing and crying, and covered her face with her hands. He seemed as distressed as she was; his patient, rather sad eyes were full of pity—and bewilderment. For a moment he stood uncertain, as if he hardly dared to interfere; then he gently took her fingers in his, and removed them from her face, and with his handkerchief he wiped the streaming lashes.

"Be reasonable, Nan, be reasonable," he said, and he put his hand persuasively on her arm, and constrained her to resume their walk. "It is nothing so very desperate. Only, certain things must be faced; and I have often been thinking that if anything happened to me, as it might happen at any moment, I should like to know you were safe and comfortably provided for. Crowhurst is very well; but you know you could not live at Crowhurst all by yourself. You could appeal to Mr. Morris, no doubt; but he would probably throw you and your small affairs into Chancery, to get rid of you, and where would you be then, Nan? Or you could write to that Miss Deyncourt, who used to come about the vicarage—she seemed a nice kind of creature—and if she would come to be a companion for you and a housekeeper—but perhaps that wouldn't work either. And then you would be at Crowhurst alone——"

"I won't have you talk like that, Dodo!" she exclaimed, "I don't care what the letter says——"

"I must talk like that," he answered her, gently. "I don't suppose I am going to die to-morrow, or next day, but a tile from a roof—a smash-up of a trap—anything might happen; and then all I should want to know, while

I had any consciousness remaining, was that you were left quite safe and sure : then I shouldn't mind anything else. You see, it is pure selfishness on my part, Nan——"

"Oh, yes, pure selfishness—nothing but pure selfishness !" she repeated, with the tears springing to her eyes again. "You have always been so selfish towards me ! But where is that letter ? I want to know who has put such things into your head."

"Oh, it is a great compliment, Nan," her father said, encouragingly. "Every young girl likes to know that some young man has been thinking of her—she likes to be asked, whatever her answer may be—an offer of marriage is something to be proud of, naturally—yes, yes, a great compliment——"

For a second she had looked up, startled ; then her face was averted ; and she listened without word or sign.

"And if you were inclined to say yes," her father went on, apparently with much good-humoured content, "it would leave you in safe and excellent guardianship, in case anything happened to me. It is only at times I am anxious, and look forward ; only at times ; most times you seem so happy and cheerful, especially when you are busy in the garden, that one forgets to be anxious and concerned, and one is apt to think that everything must go on happily for ever and ever. But it won't, you know, Nan ; it can't ; and here comes this letter to remind me that I should provide you with some safe guardianship in the future. And you needn't be alarmed ; it isn't an absolute offer of marriage frightening you by its suddenness ; oh, no ; it is only 'permission to pay his addresses' he asks for ; all fair and square and aboveboard. Perhaps a little stiff and set-up ; but Dick is always like that on great occasions—he delights in proposing toasts after dinner——"

"Dick ?" she repeated, breathlessly. "Do you mean——"

"Dick Erridge," her father proceeded, without noticing her consternation. "Oh, yes, he is a good enough fellow, though he has his little peculiarities. I suppose Dick

thought it rather fine to write to me for 'permission to pay his addresses' to you ; but perhaps it is the proper thing ; I'm sure I don't know. And there is one good point about Dick ; he has no prejudices such as some might have ; and his people would be friendly towards you—indeed, I am certain they would be very proud of you—if you were inclined to listen to him——”

She seemed to hear no more of Dick Erridge. She walked on as one in a dream. She looked neither to the right nor to the left. She saw nothing of the red-tiled farm-houses nestling among thick-foliaged trees and bushes ; she saw nothing of the small hamlet of Bixgibwen, which is now shortened into Bix ; nor of the turnpike, which is no longer a turnpike ; nor of the little post-office with its oddly cut box-trees. And when her father suggested that they had come far enough and should now retrace their steps, she turned, and walked mechanically by his side. He was still talking of Dick Erridge ; making little apologies for him, in a pathetic sort of way ; and telling her what a good chap Dick was, after all.

But when they were come once more into that solitary highway, it appeared to dawn on her that she was expected to answer a question. There was silence—and her father was regarding her anxiously. Whereupon she said, in a very low voice, “Dodo, would it please you—would it set your mind at rest—would it make you any happier if what you are thinking of were to come true ?”

For a moment he did not answer her : it was as if he were trying to swallow something. Then he laughed—rather constrainedly.

“To tell you the truth, Nan,” he said, “I'm afraid I mightn't quite like the idea of your getting married and going away from me. But, as I tell you, such things have to be faced : it's the way of the world. And then it is a long distance ahead ; there would be all the engagement-time for us to become familiar with the prospect. I mightn't even like the idea of your getting engaged ; but

then I should know it would be so much better for you in the future—to leave you in safe keeping——”

“And it would make you happier in your mind, Dodo?—it would put away all your anxiety about me?” she said, slowly.

“But my answering this letter does not pledge you to anything, Nan,” he pointed out with some eagerness (for he perceived that she had been only half listening). “Don’t you understand? You have said nothing; you need not say anything. I am merely giving him permission to come to the house—after he has made a certain explanation, fairly and openly.”

“But if it all turned out in the way you spoke of—that would please you, Dodo?” she said, in the same low voice.

He could not very well answer her, for at this moment a stranger hove in sight—a tall young man who was coming along with a fine swinging stride, his stick over his shoulder as if it were a gun. And it speedily appeared that this stranger was no stranger at all; it was Sidney Hume, his handsome, interesting features slightly flashed with the brisk exercise and the heat, his eyes modestly trying to conceal the intense satisfaction given him by this encounter.

“I’m afraid I ought to apologise,” he said, with some touch of pleasant diffidence, “for intrusion on sacred ground——”

“The public highway!” said Mr. Summers.

“But I guessed you had come out in this direction, and I fancied I might catch you up somewhere,” the young man proceeded. “I wanted to tell you that I have made all the inquiries about Wantage and Uffington, and I have all the arrangements planned, so that any day you like to name we could start. And I know Miss Summers will be interested—at least I hope so——”

And naturally enough he turned and walked with them, understanding that they were on their homeward way, while he explained to them all that could be crowded into this archæological excursion. He had a frank and winning

manner : when they reached Crowhurst, Mr. Summers could hardly help asking him to go in-doors. And now it was lunch-time : would he not stay and have a little bit of something with them ? This proposal, it is true, caused Nan some momentary perturbation ; and she fled away to consult cook and parlour-maid, leaving the two men to their own devices. But when at last Sidney was invited to go into the dining-room, it was not food or drink that occupied his mind. The room itself, to begin with, was delightfully cool on this hot June day : there were shadowy curtains that did not altogether refuse a glimpse, through the open window, of the blaze of flowers in the garden, where a butterfly would from time to time go hoveringly past. Then the table was all so neat and bright and summerlike, the snow-white cloth adorned with sprays of young beech and Canterbury-bells. But it was his young hostess, of course, who absorbed his covert and enraptured attention, whatever he had to say about the Dragon of Wantley and the battle of Ashdown. Somehow she seemed linked with the garden out there. There was a transparency of light and colour about her face that he associated with those variegated blooms visible through the open window, white and red and white and pink, and all shining and shimmering in the sun. What did he care about such base things as caviare, or galantine, or cold gooseberry tart ? He said, "Oh, thank you !" and took everything he was offered ; and ate nothing. The very gates of heaven appeared to have been opened ; the choirs were singing ; so that all the golden air outside was pulsating with the wonderful melody, while echoes of it seemed to wander in and fill this mystical, half-shadowed, enchanted room. It was but the night before he had been sunk into the deeps of despair ; now the mere magic of her presence seemed to raise a delirious joy within him ; the unattainable was not so hopelessly unattainable ; she was near ; she was his friend ; sometimes her timid eyes were turned towards him, and they were not unkind. Caviare, oatcake, salad !—for one who was

feeding on honey-dew and drinking the milk of Paradise, with a heart as hardly yet capable of realising its own amazing auguries and demands.

They went out into the garden, and he positively refused to poison the sweet air with a cigarette. She showed him the extraordinary luxuriance of roses that was promised them, when the lilacs and laburnums had gone; even now the clustered buds were bursting, and the deep crimson and pink and yellow-white involutions of velvet petals were beginning to uncurl. She went and brought the Flora, and rather shyly told him she shrank from prying into these confidences; but he said, simply enough, that he would rather like it, so long as the boyish trash did not bother her. And finally, before he left, he had persuaded Mr. Summers to fix the very next morning for their projected visit to Wantage, and Uffington Castle, and White Horse Hill.

That proved to be another day of new and strange and marvellous experiences. For one thing, as soon as he had constituted himself their guide, he found but little difficulty in entertaining them; they were quite delightfully ignorant of this neighbourhood in which they had recently settled. They had never heard of the Parliamentary siege of Greenlands; nor of Mary Blandy, her cruel heart, and unhappy father; nor of Nell Gwynn's bower of yew in the neighbourhood of Nettlebed, which is only a little way beyond Bix; nor of the well into which, as the legend goes, 'Poor Nelly,' for some unexplained reason, threw her jewels. But these trivialities of reminiscence were soon discarded. The human nature of the living and present moment is so much more important, is so transcendently and overwhelmingly interesting, when one is four-and-twenty, and when there is a pair of speedwell-blue eyes, not so far away, showing pleased attention and smiling kindness. There was an unending fascination in finding out her opinion on this point and on that. He freely volunteered his own, hungering for acquiescence, and yet cunningly contriving beforehand that it would be easy for her to acquiesce. He

spoke without reserve about himself, his pursuits and plans ; and he told her a great deal about his mother, with obvious pride. He was apparently addressing two, but in reality only one ; and he was talking with an animation quite unusual with him ; he was eager to impress, eager to elicit assent ; and all the time he was studying, with a wild infatuation that was stealing his senses away, the changing and varying expression of her flowerlike face.

Meanwhile Mr. Summers had for the most part remained seriously and attentively silent. For he was only now beginning to perceive and understand the social position and surroundings of this young man who had, as it were, dropped upon them from the clouds. Hitherto, during the brief acquaintanceship that had on one side been so sedulously cultivated, he had had no such chance. To him Sidney Hume was merely a friendly young fellow who had offered his assistance in the Fair Mile of the Oxford Road, who had walked on as far as Crowhurst, who had casually been asked to step in to look at an Ordnance Survey Map, and who had since seemed extremely anxious to continue on friendly terms with both father and daughter. He was modest and well mannered ; there was neither self-assertion nor unwarranted intrusion ; his chief desire appeared to be to cultivate this companionship that had come about in such a haphazard way. But if Jim Summers, as his former associates were in the habit of calling him, had been fully aware of the facts of the case, it is quite certain he would never have thought of asking Sidney Hume to step into his house, if only to look at an Ordnance map. There were reasons, apart from his own natural reserve and humility, which would have led him to decline this proffered acquaintanceship. But then he did not know ; and the young man had subsequently been so persistent—and likewise so straightforward and amiable and unassuming ; and then, above all, Nan had seemed pleased. It was for her sake that he had consented to come on this archaeological expedition, though small concern had he with Roman roads

and King Alfred's battles. And now—now that the pretext of history and folk-lore had been almost abandoned—now that this young man, by little inadvertent touches from time to time, was revealing to these two the world he lived in, one of the two had found food for grave reflection, and was perhaps secretly considering how this all too sudden and fervent friendship could discreetly, and without pain or rudeness, be brought to an end.

But as for Sidney Hume, the unwitting cause of this disquietude, he was troubled by no such forecasts ; these present moments, each one of them filled with magic and delight, were enough and more than enough ; the long and happy day sped quickly. And even when, late in the evening, he had reluctantly bade them good-bye, and returned to the solitude of his own home, there was no diminution of the bewilderment and transport that occupied his brain. 'If music be the food of love, play on ;' and even in this silent house he knew where to find such celestial sustenance ; he would attune his ear to listen to the subtle cadences and varied and perfect melody of Tennyson's 'Maud'—a poem for which he had the profoundest admiration, which he had championed and panegyrised in season and out of season. He went and fetched the green volume, and took a seat outside the honeysuckled porch. Late as it was, the evening was still golden and clear ; but the sounds of the day were growing fewer : occasional footfalls on the gravel road ; homeward-going children calling to each other across the bridge ; the methodical clink and clank of some four-oar or eight-oar coming swiftly along through the steely blue-gray of the river, under the brooding poplars and willows. The meadows were empty now ; and one of the houses on the wooded heights beyond had sent out its first orange ray.

* * * * *

These well-remembered lines, these haunting phrases, seemed to increase his exaltation of spirit ; they appeared naturally to belong to this new and hitherto undreamed-of

atmosphere that had come into his life. Passionate utterances that heretofore he had regarded from the merely literary point of view, he now understood and recognized in another sense : he also had tasted of 'the cruel madness of love' ; he also was filled with unrest, and longing, and dreams of heroic self-sacrifice if only that wonder of all wonders—a girl's heart inclining towards him, her choosing him out of all the rest of the world—could come true. In his case, of course, there was no 'Queen Maud in all her splendour,' nor any 'gloss of satin and glimmer of pearls,' nor yet had he heard 'A voice by the cedar-tree, In the meadow under the Hall !' But yet—sitting in the waggonette that morning—the simple costume of lilac and white that Nan Summers wore appeared to him to have some strange charm and bewitchment about it ; and her voice revealed the most heart-searching music, even in that little peculiarity of lengthening certain vowels. She did not say 'ta-own' or 'da-own' ; she said 'town' and 'down,' with just such slight dwelling on the diphthong as made the sound entirely entrancing in his ears. And no longer, as he thought of these things, was he in the deeps of despair : the unattainable might not be so hopelessly unattainable !—her eyes, timid, unsearchable, maidenlike, had they not once or twice, as they were turned towards him, said something to him, however unwittingly ? Or was that, too, but another illusion—a frantic hope rather than any possible fact ?

Then, again, as he turned over these pages—in the gathering dusk—the gas lamps now glimmering through the trees—the last of the returning boats become phantom-like on the wan bosom of the stream—here, at last, he came upon the lines that spoke more directly of Nan. 'Shine out, little head, sunning over with curls, To the flowers, and be their sun.' Why, that was Nan herself !—if only the reader, himself or another, would remember that the outward lustre of those tags and strays of hair that clustered

about her neck and ears seemed to be but part of the general sunniness of her nature and disposition. A radiant temperament ; well-wishing towards everybody ; grateful for the beautiful things of the world ; grateful, above all things, for any affection shown her. And as regarded the future, what might be the strange events lying behind that mystic veil ?—‘ I have led her home, my love, my only friend ’ ? But such things are blinding to the mental vision ; and leave one breathless.

Shut up the book : it is time to go in-doors and summon lights to the dark and hollow rooms. For now the last of the skimming and dipping martins has left the neighbourhood of the bridge ; the quivering gold reflections on the stream burn amid shadows of an oily blackness ; a deathlike silence has fallen upon the tall poplars ; and far away in the south, from behind the wooded hills, the young moon glides slowly into the transparent sky, to keep watch over the night.

CHAPTER X.

THE BULL-DOG.

WHEN Mr. Dick Erridge, having ‘ done himself well,’ as he would have phrased it, at the Red Lion, Henley, stepped into his tall dog-cart to drive out to Crowhurst, he was in a most complacent mood. His costume, as he had carefully satisfied himself at various mirrors, was elegance itself ; the gorgeous orchid in his button-hole denoted a generous, not to say lavish, mind ; while this turnout, from the rosettes at the leader’s head to the brilliant boots of the groom, was at all points faultlessly trim. It is true his equanimity was nearly upset, and himself also, just as he was turning into Bell Street ; for here a nursemaid, overcome by the appearance of two youths in blazers and boating-flannels who had passed along the highway, was gazing vacantly after them, while she pushed an unheeded

perambulator right out into the middle of the road. A collision and general smash-up seemed inevitable; and indeed Dick Erridge only avoided it by jamming his leader on to the opposite pavement, and hauling sharp at his wheeler, while he uttered a yell fit to have woken the dead: thereupon the startled maid, recalled to her senses, hastily retreated with her precious charge; a good-natured bystander got hold of the horse—which had probably been surprised to find itself looking into a shop window—and led it back into the thoroughfare; and then the charioteer resumed his way, no doubt mentally uttering furious maledictions. But it was a pleasant afternoon; Dick was of an easy-going and self-satisfied nature; and by the time he was bowling along the Fair Mile he had forgotten all about the nurse-maid, and the perambulator, and the innocent babe that had so nearly come to an untimely end.

When he reached Crowhurst he found the gate open, so that he was enabled to drive up to the front door; but in passing he had caught sight of Mr. Summers standing by the gable of the house; and thither, when he had surrendered the dog-cart to the groom, he accordingly betook himself, without going inside. Mr. Summers was alone, a hammer in his hand, while he contemplated a rope-ladder that depended from an open window above.

"Perhaps you can help me with a suggestion," he said, as soon as he had greeted his visitor. "This is a fire-escape I have just fixed in Nan's room up there: in case of an alarm, all she has to do is to throw up the window, fling out the ladder, and get down. Feel this rope: isn't it soft and silky?—it wouldn't hurt the hands of an infant. But I'll tell you what would; and that's the thorns of that rose-tree and the bars of the lattice-work; and I've been considering. I'm afraid she'd make a desperate fuss if she knew I was going to tear down the roses and the lattice: I'd have to do it some time she was in at Henley. Or perhaps if I could get some projection put along the window-sill, it might keep the ladder clear——"

Dick abruptly changed the subject.

"I was at the Albatross Club last night," he observed, significantly.

"Oh? The Parkes-MacQuarrie affair?"

"The grandest sight I ever beheld!" the podgy, pale-faced little man continued, with great enthusiasm. "The very grandest! Let's get into some quiet corner and I will tell you all about it——"

"Well, we can walk up and down here—Nan is indoors," her father said—and they rather moved away from the house.

"The grandest thing you could imagine!" Dick Erridge continued with quite genuine exultation. "And the newspapers ain't in it this morning: that's why I wanted to come and tell you. Lord Mount-Lathom addressed the reporters—the gentlemen of the press, don't you know—flattered them up to the nines about their prudence and discretion—hoped they would not mention the name of any one present—and would they be so kind as not to speak of a fight, but of a contest with gloves—in fact, he wheedled and humbugged them all over the place. Then, at eleven-thirty sharp, in came the two heroes—both of them looking magnificent——"

"I thought MacQuarrie had gone something amiss," Summers said, casually. "There was a rumour of the kind——"

"A fortnight ago—a fortnight ago," the other rejoined, in his eager haste. "They eased him off a bit, and got him all right: I assure you, you never saw two men looking in better condition—a sight for sore eyes, it was! Of course the Tasmanian is far the bigger man—the Devil they generally call him now; but the Englishman looked just as fit as a fiddle—proved it, too—and game he was—game, I tell you—for you never saw such hammering as he stood up to in the last round—just able to keep his feet, but facing up—facing up like a good 'un—until that Devil of a Tasmanian got the auctioneer home, and it was all up with

poor Parkes. Never mind : he gets £500 out of the £3000 ; and he's won the reputation of being about the pluckiest fellow that ever put on gloves. And it wasn't merely his standing up to be hammered ; MacQuarrie, the Devil, hadn't it all his own way from beginning to end—not by no means ; in the fifth round there were some grand exchanges, and the Tasmanian, I can tell you, got all he wanted, and about two-penn'orth more. My heavens, Parkes let him have a right-hander on the ribs that might have felled an ox ; but there wasn't much cheering, mind you, among all those noble sportsmen in evening dress—oh, no—there was too much oof at stake—they were too anxious about what was going to happen to let their efflorescent sentiments carry them away. Really, really, you should ha' been there ! ” he exclaimed, in a sort of ecstasy. “ It was beautiful ! All so quick, and sharp, and businesslike ; each man doing his very d—dest in every second of the three minutes ; then down in the chair, with sponging and fanning ; then up again—like two gladiators. Hammering, no doubt—yes, there was hammering in the last round—and I dare say some Johnny of a curate might have turned pale when the Devil caught Parkes a tremendous punch in the throat ; but I tell you in all the thirty-five minutes there wasn't one-fifteenth part of the lumping brutality of a football match. Skill and science, sharp as a needle, just delightful to see ; and though I'm an Englishman, though I'm no Colonial, what I say is, ‘ Bravo, Parkes, *and* bravo, MacQuarrie ! ’ Grand men, both ; and I for one admit that the best man won—though I lost my little bit through his infernal slogging.”

His enthusiasm seemed to sober down a little at this last recollection ; and it was in a calmer mood that he went on to give Mr. Summers further particulars of this great occasion, especially dwelling on the number of titled persons present, and the extreme elegance and propriety of the proceedings. To all this Summers listened in his usual

grave and attentive way ; then he said, looking towards the house :

"I wonder what has become of Nan ? Suppose we go in-doors and see if she has got a cup of tea for you."

"One word," Dick Erridge interposed, in an undertone. "I quite understand your letter—and awfully obliged, too. You trust to me. A nod's as good as a wink. I wouldn't do anything—don't you know. But I wanted to put myself right with you—all fair, square, and aboveboard. And I've come out at once, just to show you. I know what's what. I'm not that kind. Not much."

By the time these enigmatic sentences had been uttered the young man and his elder companion had reached the house ; and, with a little adjustment of his collar and a final shooting-out of his cuffs, Dick followed his host in-doors. They found Nan in the drawing-room, where she was engaged in arranging some tall feathered grasses. She had heard the dog-cart arrive, and had guessed who this visitor must be.

"Well, this time I've got safely out," said he, in an airy manner which was meant to give her confidence. "No accident this time."

"An accident ?—driving ?" she said, regarding him with curious eyes.

"Oh, no. Fact is, the last time I thought of paying you a visit, I had a little misunderstanding with Henley Bridge, that's all ; and the bridge got the best of it. I thought I would put in an hour or so on the river ; and I was getting on first-rate—very well indeed—when it occurred to me to try to burst Henley Bridge in two. The bridge burst me in two—or my boat, anyway ; and chucked me into the Thames ; and if it hadn't been for a most noble youth who jumped in and caught me by the scruff of the neck, I should have been a goner, and no mistake. That's where the awkward part of the story comes in, you see. Thames water is a poor drink ; there's no stimulus in it, but quite the reverse ; and I suppose I was rather sick and sorry

when I got out, for I let that young fellow go away without even saying 'Thank you' to him. What a precious bounder he must have thought me ! And then, when I discovered his address, and went along to apologise, I was in a suit of waiter's clothes : a regular beast of a predicament—and of course he wouldn't dine with me. But I'll put it straight. I'll call on him when I go back to Henley this evening. One doesn't like to be considered bad form, you know. And this young fellow is rather a bit of a swell—at least his people are : I've been making inquiries. Of course when you're lugged out of a hole, it doesn't matter whether the gaff is of iron or of silver—still——"

"Did you get to know his name?" said Nan, in wild surmise.

"Oh, yes—Hume—Sidney Hume. A very good family," the young man went on. "No doubt that is merely a country house of theirs. And if I should meet him again I hope I sha'n't be quite such a Guy Fawkes Guy as I was when he last saw me."

"We know that Mr. Sidney Hume slightly," said Nan's father—for she herself, anxious only that her extreme embarrassment should remain unobserved, did not dare to speak. "We made his acquaintanceship in an accidental sort of way ; and since then he has called once or twice ; indeed, we went on a long expedition with him yesterday, and I should not at all wonder if he walked over this afternoon, to have a bit of a chat over it."

"Oh, you know him?" exclaimed Dick Erridge, in amazement. "But when I mentioned your name to him, and asked him if he had heard of you as a neighbour, he said no !"

"The acquaintanceship, such as it is," said Mr. Summers, quietly, "is quite recent." And then he added, perhaps in view of certain unconfessed speculations of his : "Quite a chance acquaintanceship—and perhaps we have about seen the end of it."

Nan sat silent—silent and troubled, notwithstanding the

airy unconcern with which the young man continued the conversation. She did not know what this visit might portend ; nor what was expected of her ; nor how far her mere remaining in the room might be taken for acquiescence. And here at the same moment was her father intimating that their brief association with Sidney Hume was about to cease. A sense of some impending calamity seemed to weigh upon her ; she could not listen to this talk about the Albatross Club ; those names he mentioned—as though half the peerage and baronetage were familiarly known to him—were but as vain echoes to her, conveying nothing.

Then a sound caused her heart to stand still : it was a footstep on the gravel outside. The bell rang. Some one entered the house ; the drawing-room door was thrown open ; a name announced. And when Sidney Hume appeared, tall, handsome, self-possessed, it was on her that his eyes first fell, it was to her that his steps were instinctively bent. Then he turned to her father. Then to the stranger.

But there was no need of an introduction ; and indeed Dick Erridge was so eager and anxious to remove from himself, finally and for ever, the imputation of having done anything not quite in accordance with the proprieties, that he instantly proceeded to make the profoundest apologies for his apparent bad manners ; he renewed his explanations ; he expressed an almost abject gratitude ; until Sidney, who had a kind of direct way with him, grew impatient.

"You were in no danger at all," he said, briefly. "There were one or two people standing by who could have picked you out."

"Yes, but they didn't, and you did," the young man insisted.

"You might have been in danger on a regatta-day," Sidney observed, with a laugh. "For you'd have had about twenty boats and half a dozen steam-launches all charging down on the top of you, to rescue you : that would have been

dangerous enough." And therewith he turned to Nan, and began to ask her whether she had quite recovered from her driving and climbing of the day before ; while Nan answered him with far less than her usual light-heartedness—in fact, with self-conscious face and averted eyes.

But Dick Erridge, having acquitted himself of the suspicion of being a 'bounder,' having grovelled sufficiently, had thereafter no intention of 'taking a back seat,' as he himself would have said. He had much too wholesome an opinion of his powers of entertaining ; he wished to show this stranger the familiar footing he held in this household ; and, above all, he naturally desired to display a little, with the eyes of Beauty looking on.

"No barrel-organs to bother you here, Mr. Summers," he observed, in his chirpy and cheerful fashion. "No 'Lambeth Lotty'—nothing o' that kind to disturb you. But I tell you it's very odd how quickly a comic song that catches on at the halls—and 'Lambeth Lotty' is the last—it's very odd how quickly it is laid hold of by the upper ten ; it's rayther mysterious, as the sailor said of the sausages ; but I notice that there are a good many curtained boxes at the halls nowadays. Well, why not ? Why shouldn't the tiptoppers like a bit of fun as well as anybody else : it can't all be state concerts at Buckingham Palace. I don't know whether they still have midnight tobogganing on tea-trays down the staircases of country houses—that was a high old amusement, and no mistake !—but anyhow, last Sunday evening, at the Granville Gallery—as swell a gathering as you could get in London—when Jack Rintoul sang 'Lambeth Lotty' they gave him a perfect roar of a chorus. At least so I hear ; for I wasn't there myself," the young man observed, honestly. "And why shouldn't they ? The air isn't half a bad one, and the chorus is ripping. Just listen to this."

He went to the piano, opened it, sat down, and ran his fingers lightly over the keys. Clearly he was quite a clever and facile pianist : driving tandem was not his sole ac-

complishment. But when he had dashed off the air, which was a flimsy, catching kind of thing, the temptation of the chorus was too much for him—he burst into song :

“ O Lotty,
Now you're dotty,
For carrots isn't in it with your hair ;
And your bonnet's all askew,
And your nose is rather blue,
And they'd run you off the grounds at Greenwich Fair.”

“ Then there comes in a bit of a dance, you know,” he said, and his fingers still ran up and down the keys, “ though I fancy that would be left out at the Granville Gallery. But can you wonder that the people caught at the chorus ? It isn't half bad, you know.”

And again he sang, with some additional touch of staccato emphasis :

“ O Lotty,
Now you're dotty,
For carrots isn't in it with your hair ;
And your bonnet's all askew,
And your nose is rather blue,
And they'd run you off the grounds at Greenwich Fair.”

He did not vouchsafe them any further information about the young lady of the south side who seemed to have been over-vain of her personal appearance ; he left the piano and jauntily resumed his seat ; and was presently engaged in proving that the very smartest people (as he called them) would flock to the Music Halls if only they had sufficient courage, and that they only went to see Shakespeare, as they went to church, because it was considered the right thing to do. Dick had plenty to say for himself ; he was determined to shine—and he shone.

Tea and cake and such things brought some little excuse for a further prolongation of their stay ; but at last both the young men rose to go, and Dick Erridge was so kind as to offer to drive Sidney into the town—an invitation which, for reasons, was promptly accepted. For hardly had they got away from Crowhurst, making for the Oxford Road, when Sidney said,

"You seem to have known Mr. Summers for a considerable time."

"Oh, yes," his neighbour answered, with some pride. "A goodish bit now—a goodish bit."

"What was he?"

A simple question; but Dick Erridge hesitated. And then the snob in him (or perhaps some dimly felt generous instinct: who can tell?) caused him to lie.

"Oh, a trainer—a well-known trainer," he answered; and then he quickly went on to add: "Of course he has retired from all that now. He has made his little pile, you know; a warm man, in his quiet way. And made it fair and square, too. 'Honest Jim Summers,' as they used to call him."

"Honest Jim Summers?" repeated Sidney, with a trifle of surprise. "That sounds rather familiar, doesn't it?"

"In a fashion it does, yes," observed Dick Erridge, lightly. "But it's nothing to say *against* a man, don't you know. Might be worse things said against a man than that. Rather a compliment, in its way. It isn't every man who has had to do with race-horses leaves the same reputation behind him."

"I dare say not. Did you know his wife?" Sidney proceeded: he was longing to speak about Nan, but could not, somehow.

"Oh, no," his companion made answer. "Before my time. But I've heard of her. A terrible business—railway accident—the mother and eldest child, a boy, killed—this one, this girl, almost an infant, saved. It broke Jim Summers all up, as I've heard; he went away to Australia for a while; and then he came back, and simply devoted himself to the remaining child, having her carefully educated, and looking forward to the time when he and she could start house together. And, now they are at Crowhurst, they seem to hit it off pretty well, don't they? In my rambles through this vale of tears I've seen proud parents fond of their children; but the like of Jim Summers with regard to

his daughter I have never seen. He just worships her—thinks of nothing else—cares for nothing else; and she is just as much given up to her beloved Dodo, as she calls him. Quite refreshing, in these cynical times. There's one thing pretty sure: if any man ever harms that girl he'd better keep away out of the reach of Jim Summers's fist—he'd better keep far, far away—he'd better get to the outermost edge of the earth, and hide in a hole there, and not come out till the Day of Judgment."

Sidney hardly knew whether or not to resent this tone: after all, there was in it some little touch of human nature, despite its self-sufficient flippancy. But one more question he would ask.

"I suppose her mother must have been a very beautiful woman?" he said.

"So I have heard," the young man answered. "But of course there's no speaking about her to Mr. Summers. There are some things too awful: I can see now that a sudden railway whistle seems to go through him like a knife, just as if he were stabbed. Come, get along, Tommy!" This last interjection to his leader, accompanied by the lightest touch of the whip, for now they had entered upon the broad expanse of the Fair Mile.

When at length they had got into the quiet little town, Sidney managed to shake off his companion, notwithstanding his reiterated proposals and invitations; and, leaving Dick Erridge at the Red Lion, he pursued the rest of his homeward way on foot. He wished to be alone; he was unaccountably perturbed and anxious. This visit of the afternoon had left him a prey to vague apprehensions. For one thing, Nan had appeared troubled and concerned; all her friendliness, her light-heartedness of the day before had fled; he had hardly ever encountered her eyes. And then, again, the familiarity with this household professed by Dick Erridge seemed to make of him, Sidney, something of a stranger. At this very moment he would fain have gone away out to Crowhurst again, to assure himself that the

speedwell eyes had no real reason for avoiding his. A dumb, unappeasable longing possessed him—a yearning of the heart that tortured him; the red and gray house among the beechwoods seemed now worlds and worlds remote. Books, when he tried that distraction, were useless; the printed page gave him back nothing—not even the story

“told

By a cavern wind unto a forest old.”

He went out into the garden. It was a placid evening. The tall poplars and the pendulous willows stirred and no more than stirred; the smooth, oily olive-green of the river was only broken when a boat came shooting along from under the yellow arches of the bridge. The hush of the twilight was falling over the wide meadows and the wooded hills; voices sounded distant; the coming night was not far off. Peace without, but no peace within; rather an ever-increasing and unreasoning distress, that was none the less real that its origin was veiled. For this young man had tried a fall with “implacable Cypris, Cypris terrible,” and been sadly overthrown.

The night that followed the dying out of the day was still and calm, and, in these riverside gardens, laden with scent. A mother swan that had been troubled about her inattentive cygnet had long ago persuaded her gray offspring to go away home, the two of them disappearing like ghosts into the shadows. The last of the gossiping villagers had left the bridge; the last of the boats had been drawn up on the bank. And as Sidney, moved by some impetuous and occult desire, passed along the almost empty street, and ascended the Gravel Hill, on his way out into the country, a silver half-moon was shining clear in the southern heavens, and in the interstices of the curdled clouds overhead—in the deep violet-blue spaces—here and there was visible an occasional star.

He did not know why he had come hither, except through an over-governing restlessness. As he wandered on, the voiceless beechwoods surrounded him with their

mysterious gloom ; then again he emerged into the wan moonlight on the open heights. Drawing nearer and more near to Crowhurst, he hesitated from time to time, uncertain whether to advance or recede, and yet ever drawn forward by this secret and uncontrollable magnetism. What harm could there be in some far-off glimpse ? Or might there not be a red ray in some solitary window ? Though indeed the world appeared to be all asleep now.

In course of time he approached the gate, and he did so breathlessly. He was afraid of his footfalls on the highway, the silence here seemed so intense. Intense also was the silence that lay over the slumbering house ; certain gables, with lattice-work and roses, were palely visible in the moonlight, the rest buried in deepest shadow. Nor was there any faint crimson glow in any one of the windows : he grew a little more confident : he even advanced to the gate, and idly placed a hand on the topmost bar.

At this very moment a figure stepped out from the blackness of the rhododendron bushes and confronted him.

"Yes ?" was the single word of challenge, uttered quite quietly.

And for a second the sudden apparition startled Sidney beyond measure—he involuntarily raised his arm, to strike or to defend ; but the next instant he perceived that this was Mr. Summers, who was regarding him calmly. And there had been simultaneous recognition on the other side as well.

"Oh, Mr. Hume ?—I beg your pardon," Summers said.

"No, I had no intention of breaking into your house," Sidney rejoined, with less embarrassment than might have been expected. "The fact is, I came wandering away out on so fine a night—and stopped for a minute to have a look——"

"And if you are going on, I may as well take a bit of a turn with you," Mr. Summers said, opening the gate and stepping into the highway. "I don't know whether Nan is asleep yet—she might be surprised to hear voices." And

then, when they had gone a little way, he resumed : " We rarely have any one come along this road so late at night ; and I heard you some distance off. You see, I'm rather fond of loitering about outside the house, just to make sure that everything is safe and sound. I'm Nan's bull-dog—so I tell her. It's my business to see that no stranger comes near——"

" It would be uncommonly awkward for the stranger," said Sidney, " if he had any felonious intent."

" And I'm sure I ask your pardon, Mr. Hume, for suspecting you," Mr. Summers said, quite humbly.

" Not at all!—it's the other way round," the younger man made answer. " I had no business to be roaming about the country at such an hour. I wonder if Miss Summers quite understands how vigilant a guardian she has got ? "

" I think Nan trusts me," her father said, simply ; and then he added, as if by way of excuse : " You see, it is a kind of amusement for me. I like it. And it does not harm any one."

So they went on for some time, chatting pleasantly enough, until they came to a parting of roads, and here Sidney said good-night, for he was returning to Henley by the Fair Mile. Soon the last of his footfalls were absorbed in the prevailing silence of the beechwoods and the dark. And then Nan's bull-dog made his solitary way back to Crowhurst.

CHAPTER XI.

AN ENEMY IN THE PATH.

BUT although Mr. Summers had professed to treat this encounter with Sidney Hume as an ordinary and trivial thing, in reality it caused him profound alarm. For it needed but little acquaintance with human nature to perceive that this aimless night-wandering, this lingering

by the gate, was nothing other than the restless, agonised vagary of a lover ; and here, indeed, was a climax that had not been foreseen. Yet the dismay with which he regarded this discovery had in it no trace of ignoble jealousy or selfishness. He had already brought himself to face the possibility of Nan's getting married ; nay, he had persuaded himself that it was a desirable thing she should make her choice ; he had told her that he himself would feel happier and better content if he saw her life fairly settled. But he had been thinking of Dick Erridge and of Dick's polite request for "permission to pay his addresses" ; he had not been thinking of this other young man, whose association with them he had just been proposing should cease altogether. Not that any one was too good for his bright-spirited, affectionate, laughing-hearted Nan ; and in other circumstances he might have been pleased to see her provided with a husband as handsome, and well-born, and modest, and good-humoured as this Sidney Hume ; but his schemes for Nan's future had never contemplated her entering a social sphere where she would run the risk of being treated with patronage, if not with scorn. This midnight adventure showed him that he had resolved none too soon on dropping an acquaintanceship that had on one side at least been too diligently cultivated : the young man must betake himself elsewhere to choose for himself a mate.

He passed an anxious night, and the morning still found him in grievous perplexity. Would not the straightforward way be to go direct to Sidney Hume, confess his suspicions and fears, and explain why this brief companionship should at once and definitely cease ? Or would not that be in a measure compromising Nan, whose name he did not even wish to mention ? Then, again, ought he to tell her of the incident of the night before ; or might not that be simply putting fancies into her head ? Young people were imaginative and whimsical, and given to thinking over things ; perhaps it might be better if he held his peace.

"Nan," said he, when they had agreed to stroll in to Henley together, "I will bring an action against that coach-builder, if he doesn't send home the phaeton at once. I cannot have you continually walking in to Henley, every time you want to call at a shop or two."

"But I like the walking, Dodo!" she made answer, as she was leaving the room. "And I shall be ready in five or ten minutes."

"Don't hurry—don't hurry," said he, careful as ever of her. "There's no hurry at all. You'll find me dawdling along the road—you can overtake me whenever you like."

For he could not get these harassing questions answered. And yet they were nearly all being answered, so far as he was concerned, on this very highway, and that within a few minutes of his leaving the house. As he was walking along, his hands clasped behind his back, occasionally his eyes lighted on an animal, some considerable distance off, that at first he considered to be merely a large dog. He paid little heed; he was plunged in reverie; but this was the only living creature in the solitary thoroughfare; and naturally his glance wandered back to it. Then in a dim kind of fashion—gradually, not suddenly—it dawned upon him that there was something uncanny about this beast that was approaching; something unusual and strange; it surely was no dog, whatever else it might be? He looked again, startled into a keener consciousness; and now he perceived that this was certainly no dog; this tawny-hued creature with the round bullet head, with white bristles at the mouth, cropped-looking ears, long body, and curved, down-sweeping tail that nearly touched the ground; nor had it the springy gait of a dog—it came along with a stealthy, sinuous, slouching movement of its massive and supple limbs. The next instant he had guessed the truth: this was some animal escaped from a travelling menagerie—some creature of the puma kind—that was now eying him furtively as it drew near. Well, he did not know what to do; rather, he wanted to do nothing, if the beast would

prove equally obliging and pass on. He stood still, watching—ready to meet any spring as best he might—but sincerely hoping there would be nothing of the sort. Now at this point of the road the foot-path is bounded by a row of elms ; and behind these again is a dilapidated fence ; and as the puma, with its silent footfall, and its deep-grooved, feline eyes warily observing him, approached, it showed a disposition to sidle off between the trees and the fence. He let it, and welcome ; it was none of his business to stop it ; he was not armed even with a stick. He remained standing in the middle of the highway. The fawn-coloured, velvet-footed creature skulked in by the fence, pursuing its stealthy course ; he was content to let it go.

And then something like fire seemed to flash through his brain : he suddenly thought of Nan. Like a coward he had let the beast go by ; Nan would be coming along ; she would be terrified, would hesitate, and retreat, inviting attack ; and what then ? From that moment this man knew neither what he did nor what was happening to him. He was governed by the one determination, that so long as the breath of life remained within his body, he would dispute the way to Crowhurst with this animal that had just passed ; there should be no danger for Nan, when she came out, trusting to his protection of her. He ran along the road ; he could see the tawny creature making its way between the elms and the fence ; as he approached it obliquely, it turned slightly to regard him ; and therewith he threw himself upon it, with both hands gripped into its neck, trying to pin the round bullet head to the ground. He had no wish to hurt the brute, or he might have hammered it between the eyes with his fist ; there was but the one thought in his mind : “ No, you cannot go that way. Any other way you are free to go, but not that way. So long as I can pinion you down, I will take care that Nan is safe.”

And now a fierce and appalling struggle had begun—a struggle that at the very outset had nearly ended ill for

Nan's father, for the loose fat folds of skin on the animal's neck yielded somewhat, and with a powerful backward jerk it had nearly wrenched itself free. Nearly, but not quite : nay, Summers managed to better his grip, getting one hand well into the windpipe ; and this resolute grip he stuck to, though the convulsive contortions and writhings of the beast's body were terrible to withstand. There was not a sound—neither a roar nor a groan ; but the long tail of the creature curved and lashed in fury ; the strong bristles from its gray muzzle stood out erect and stiff ; and each round ball of a foot, that had formerly been as velvet, now showed a gaping semi-circle of angry claws, as it tore and wrenched and fought. How long could such a contest last ?—this powerful brute was so sinuous and slippery !—the odour of its breath was so overwhelmingly fetid ! He thought he heard a sound of wheels ; but he could not reason, or even hope. He hung on to his vicelike grip despite the deep-lacerating claws. Then there were voices near him—human voices ; but he did not turn, nor even think ; his fingers kept their merciless indentation in the straining and twisting neck ; it was with a mighty grasp that Nan's bulldog held on to his—or rather her—enemy. And then—then something went wrong ; he seemed to choke and gasp with pain ; and if he had any consciousness at all, it was of some vague desire to say, “ Good-bye, Nan—good-bye—good-bye ”—and after that he knew nothing.

“ Are you better, sir ? ”

This was the first sound that reached his ears, after a vacant space of swoon : he opened his eyes—and instinctively put his hand up to his heart.

“ Yes, yes,” he said, with difficulty. Then he anxiously glanced along the road. “ I shall be all right in a minute. There'll be some one here directly—she must not be told—she must not be frightened——”

“ If you would get into the dog-cart, sir,” the man said, “ I will drive you down to Henley, and you could see a surgeon—— I'm very sorry——”

"No, no!" said Summers, impatiently—though he seemed to gasp somehow in his breathing. He struggled to his feet, with friendly assistance. Out there, as he could see, in the highway was the proffered dog-cart; and near to the horse's head stood two men, each of whom held a thong of the leash that secured the puma, while one of them had a heavy dog-whip in his hand. "Why don't you take the beast away?" Nan's father continued, with another anxious glance along the road. "My daughter will be here directly—she must not understand anything of what has happened. Why don't you go away?"

"I don't like to leave you, sir," the man said. "You see we've got the puma safe enough—much obliged to you, sir—don't know what might ha' happened—for he's a nasty one when his temper's riz——"

"But why don't you go away?" Summers said, imploringly. "For Heaven's sake, man, go away—only go away! That's all I ask of you. Leave me to myself. I'm all right."

With evident reluctance the man retired a step or two; and Mr. Summers, after some feeble attempt at smoothing his clothes, that had got considerably dishevelled in the struggle, set out to walk back to Crowhurst, slowly and carefully, and with a curiously preoccupied look on his downcast face, almost as if he were listening. But as soon as he saw Nan coming along, he pulled himself together; he straightened himself up; he endeavoured to appear quite unconcerned; and his left arm, that was still running warm with blood, he hid as he best could.

"Are you going to scold me, Dodo?" she called to him. "Have I kept you waiting too long?"

"Oh, no," he said, as she came up. "But—but I am going back to the house for a minute—I have forgotten my watch."

At the same moment she noticed the strange grayness of his complexion, and also the disarray of his dress, which with him was a most unwonted thing.

"What is it, Dodo? What has happened?" she cried.

"Nothing, Nan, nothing——"

But now her eye caught sight of certain dark spots on the ground; moved by a sudden wild suspicion and fear she passed quickly to his side, to the half-concealed arm; and then, when she saw the torn and rent coat sleeve, and the blood flowing freely over his hand, she uttered a piteous little cry—more of compassion, perhaps, than of absolute terror.

"I tell you it is nothing, Nan," he said. "A mere scratch—it was the branch of a thorn."

She knew better than that, but she was not going to bother him with questions. For she also had some little bit of nerve. Not one word did she utter as she walked by his side along to the gate; she merely listened to his grave assurances that there was nothing to be alarmed about; and if her lips were a trifle pale and resolved, she showed no other sign of emotion. They reached the house.

"Nan," he said, "you might go and tell old John I want him for a second."

"No," she answered him.

"But he must help me off with my coat."

"I can do that," she said, calmly.

She went up with him to his room; she took off his coat and waistcoat; with a pair of scissors she cut away the crimsoned shirt sleeve—the sight of the streaming blood in no wise seeming to shock or deter her; and in an incredibly short time she had everything ready—basin, water, sponge, towels, and a handful of bandages brought from her ambulance chest.

"I wouldn't hurry, Nan," said he, gently. "I wouldn't hurry at all. You see, I had a little bit of a spasm—a trifling thing; but perhaps it was the running of the blood made the heart work again and brought me back to my senses. I'm not much of a doctor; but there may be something in that; and in any case why should you trouble? This kind of thing is not for you at all. I wish you would tie a

silk handkerchief round my arm ; and I will lie down for a while ; and you can send old John into Henley for a doctor to come out ; and you can go into the garden and amuse yourself."

"Yes, I am likely to go and amuse myself in the garden while you are like this !" she answered him ; and therewithal she proceeded—not unskilfully either, for some smattering of ambulance instruction had been included in her curriculum at the vicarage—to bathe and stanch those ragged flesh wounds, and bind them with cool wet bandages. And then she fetched him his dressing-gown, and helped him to put it on ; and she improvised a sling out of her feather boa, and hung that round his neck, and placed his arm in it ; and then she got him to lie down on the couch by the window, hoping he would in time fall asleep—for he seemed somewhat faint through loss of blood—while the surgeon was being brought out from Henley. Her father quite surrendered himself into her hands.

"I did not know they were such practical people at the vicarage," said he.

And it was not to old John the gardener, nor yet to the small groom, that Nan intrusted the duty of summoning out the doctor with all possible speed ; she knew one who was fleet of foot than either of them—and that was herself ; and presently she was on the highway again, making for Henley at a fine pace, rendered possible to her by her light step and lissome figure. Yet she had not gone very far when she met a dog-cart, driven by a man who appeared to be in no great haste, for his horse was walking ; and without a moment's hesitation she went up to this man.

"I beg your pardon, sir," she said, "but would you be so kind as to drive me in to Henley ? I want to fetch a surgeon."

The man regarded her with some curiosity.

"I don't know, miss, but it may be as you belong to the gentleman that was hurt nigh by here, about half an hour ago——"

"I am his daughter!" she exclaimed.

"There, now!" he said. "And the gentleman he would send me away; but I wasn't easy in my mind—no, I wasn't easy in my mind; and I thought I'd come back, and see if there wasn't anybody about, that I might ask about him. And I hope, miss, the gentleman isn't badly hurt——"

"But will you drive me in to Henley at once, please—will you be so kind?" Nan interposed, urgently.

"That I will," said he, shifting the reins to his right hand, and giving her his left to help her up. And then he turned the horse, and sent him forward towards the town.

"What was it that happened to my father?" she demanded.

"Why, did he not tell you about the puma?" the man said, in surprise.

"He told me nothing. I suppose he thought I might be frightened. But I am not so easily frightened. Tell me what happened."

Thereupon, as far as he knew it, he gave her a complete narrative—of the escape of the puma; of their pursuit; of the terrible struggle that must have taken place in the pathway; and of their arrival just in time to pinion the beast, at the moment that her father appeared to be attacked by some fit. To Nan the whole story was as clear as daylight. It was to save her from possible harm that her father had engaged in this deadly wrestle; he knew she was coming along the road; single-handed he had striven with and held his own against that dangerous brute. She understood: she could see it all. The man beside her went on to tell her of the various pumas of which he had had experience, some of them docile, others of them savage, but all of them of extraordinary suppleness and agility; and he had no words to express his admiration of the splendid strength and courage of the gentleman who had waged that grim fight. But it was not of her father's

great physical powers that Nan was thinking ; rather it was of a certain weakness of the heart which, as he had been warned, might at any moment develop alarming symptoms. Yet, as this last incident once more demonstrated, he seemed to have no thought of himself, no regard for himself, wherever she was concerned. She heard no more about pumas, tame or savage. She was stealthily crying.

The doctor returned with Nan to Crowhurst ; Mr. Summers—much against his will, for he wished to make light of this affair—was transformed into an invalid ; Nan, as self-appointed nurse, received ample and minute instructions ; and these she proceeded to carry out with an assiduous, and affectionate, and scrupulous diligence. Nevertheless she was not satisfied.

“Dodo,” she said on the following day, “will you let me telegraph to Mr. Erridge to come and see you ?”

“But why, Nan—but why ?” he asked.

“It would cheer you up a bit, and keep you amused,” she said. “I’m afraid I only tire you. Mr. Erridge knows about so many things that interest you, and he can go on talking——”

“I don’t want talking, Nan,” he answered her. “I would rather play a game of draughts with you than talk an evening long with Dick Erridge. But what would content me best of all would be for you to go oftener out into the garden, or along the road for a walk ; you’re not used to be constantly in-doors. I can get on well enough with a book or a newspaper——”

“And I know what would happen,” she said, promptly. “You would put the newspaper down. You would lie and think. And it’s about me you would be thinking ; and you would grow anxious and disturbed—the very thing the doctor said must be avoided——”

“Well, indeed I have been thinking about you, Nan,” he said, slowly. “Especially since yesterday. Supposing, yesterday, I had not come to my senses again——”

"Dodo, I will not have you talk like that!" she protested, as she had protested before.

"But I must talk like that," he said, gravely and gently. "I must talk like that. Well, in such a case how would you be situated? You are too young to live in this house alone. And even if Miss Deyncourt came to live with you, you would be still quite uncertain as to the future. Can you wonder if that makes me anxious? Of course I don't particularly wish to see you married—not now—not at this moment; but I should like to know, especially after what happened yesterday, that there was some understanding that your future was all safe and secure. And that, Nan," he added, regarding her, "is why I should be glad to see Dick Erridge, if you care to telegraph to him."

Her face flushed crimson; and she was silent. He also remained silent.

"We have come to *King Henry V.*," she said, presently. "You remember, Dodo, the last play left off at the point where poor old Falstaff is sent into disgrace. Shall I go on?"

"But about Dick Erridge?" he said.

There was a moment of hesitation.

"May I send the telegram in your name?" she asked.

"Certainly."

"Then I will write out the message."

"And there's another thing I have been thinking over, Nan," he continued. "I wanted to speak to you about Mr. Hume."

And again she was silent; but the fingers touching the open page before her trembled a little.

"You remember, when you left the vicarage to come here, I told you you would have to make up your own little set of friends and acquaintances, just as there might be the opportunity; of course there are not many chances in such an out-of-the-world place as this. But there's Dick Erridge, now—he's all right—his people would be friendly

enough—Dick's all right. As for Mr. Hume, I'm afraid we have made a mistake, Nan, and that's the fact. I gathered as much on the day we drove from Wantage; he told us a good deal about himself and his family that day; and I have been thinking over it. Nan, it won't do. His people are not our people. They have a different place in the world altogether. And it might in time come to be an introduction to his relatives; and I don't want to have you subjected to any snub. I am too proud for that. I don't complain of people having prejudices; it is only natural; but I would rather turn to the people who have no such prejudices—people like Dick Erridge and his family, people like that. I don't say anything against Mr. Hume himself; not at all; he seems to me modest, and gentlemanly, and well-meaning; but young men make mistakes; and I think he made a mistake in becoming acquainted with us; and that we have made a mistake too in continuing the acquaintance; and that there is only the one way out—to let it end, now. Do you quite understand me, Nan? Is it quite clear to you?"

"Yes, Dodo," she said, in a low voice.

It was quite clear to her. And perhaps that was the reason why, when Sidney Hume called that afternoon and was shown into the drawing-room, the maidservant returned with the message that Mr. Summers had met with an accident, and that Miss Summers was in constant attendance on him: they begged the visitor to excuse them. And again, when he called the next morning, anxious to offer any possible help, there was the same message, with the assurance that Mr. Summers was doing very well. And yet again, when he went out in the afternoon, moved by some desperate desire to see her if but for a moment—to hear her voice—to convince himself that those dear eyes were not overtroubled by this misfortune—he was once more refused. He went away thinking she might have vouchsafed him a single word, a single glance.

And when he returned to Henley there was a letter from his mother, filled with half-amused, half-angry reproaches.

Was he never to have done with those wandering actors?—had he lost himself in India or Asia Minor two thousand years ago? At all events, she said, Lady Helen and she were coming down for the Henley week. It would be too absurd for each of them to have a river-side house at Henley and be absent from the regatta. And if the Monks-Hattons did not care to entertain, “dearest Helen” could at least give her friends tea on the lawn. Plenty of friends, Mrs. Hume added, she would have on that busy occasion, even if a certain young man had not returned from his exploration of the ghostly Hellenistic world; but perhaps by that time he would have become alive to the fact that two lone women, when they proposed to pay a few visits among the house-boats, might prefer to be taken about by one whom they knew rather than throw themselves on the mercy of a waterman. She wound up by hinting that, after the Henley week, Lady Helen might not care to return to town; in which case she, the writer, would of course resume occupation of Lilac Lodge.

So both of them were coming down, and that almost directly? But something had happened since he had seen them last—something sufficiently momentous: he had not been, as they seemed to imagine, loitering all his time away in the phantom company of those Greek strolling players.

CHAPTER XII.

“LET THE SWEET HEAVENS ENDURE.”

YES; Henley was waking up out of its old-world drowsiness. On the river the course for the regatta was being staked out with white poles; under the tall poplars workmen were hammering at a stand; small red flags caught the eye here and there amongst the green; now and again a practising eight would come swinging along, their blue-tipped oars hitting the surface into silver, their coach, riding along the towpath, bawling at them his criticisms and commands.

Sometimes there would be as many as six, perchance even seven, spectators on the bridge, their elbows at right angles on the parapet; the telegraph-boy would be seen making for the Angel, or the Royal, or the Red Lion, with a brown envelope in his hand; the two or three cab-drivers at the station, when a train came in, aroused themselves from their dark and mysterious reverie, and tried to look as if they half expected a fare. Then all around the landscape was at its brightest and freshest—the densely foliated heights, the shimmering stream, the wide meadows showing their luminous tints in our cool English sunshine; while the gardens were now a blaze of roses, and scarlet geraniums, and luxuriant honeysuckle. It seemed as though Henley would be worth a casual glance, when London came down.

But neither with these busy preparations nor with the basking landscape was Sidney in any manner concerned; his thoughts were away inland among the whispering beech-woods. Distracting thoughts they were—conjectures—vacillations: he did not know what to make of the repeated refusals he had encountered on his visits to Crowhurst; he began to ask himself whether they meant that the door there was shut on him for ever. Then one morning, when these conflicting anxieties and hesitations had given way to an overpowering determination that he must, at whatever cost, have speech of Nan herself—on this particular morning he was startled to perceive Dick Erridge driving across Henley bridge. There could not be the slightest doubt whither the gaily dressed young man was bound; he only stopped at the Red Lion to have a chat and “a drink”; then he drove on again. And in spite of his calmer reason, some strangely disquieting fancies began to occupy Sidney’s mind. Would Dick Erridge be granted admission where he had been denied? Well, why not? He was an old friend—of Mr. Summers’s, at least. Would Nan come down to the drawing-room to see him, instead of sending him a message? And yet again, why not? She was bound to be

civil to him, as an old acquaintance of her father's; she might even have to ask him to stay to lunch, while the horses were being rested; and these two might be compelled, in the existing circumstances, to have luncheon by themselves, in the cool small dining-room, with the shaded open windows, and the vivid glimpses of flowers. That was an abhorrent suggestion; and his brows grew dark over it. Not that he feared in Dick Erridge a possibly successful rival; he could not insult Nan by any such supposition; Nan, with her clear, shrewd eyes, her swift perceptions, and sunny laughter, was quite capable of forming her own estimate of the music-hallish youth. But he would not have him even go near her; it was a degradation; that these two should sit at table together by themselves was a monstrous thing; and no doubt he would do his best to entertain her with his "shallow wit." This was not at all jealous anger—Sidney assured himself—that filled his heart and seemed to blacken out the very sunlight from the day around him; but, if not, it was a remarkably good imitation of it; and in the end—after varying moods of indecision, of vague apprehension, and indignant self-reproach—he got his hat and started off to find out definitely for himself whether Dick Erridge had been received at Crowhurst.

There was little difficulty about that. Erridge was almost certain to return by the Fair Mile; for although there is the other highway terminating in Gravel Hill, it is exceedingly steep as it descends into the town, and Dick was not likely to run the risk of having his leader turn round in the middle of the road and ask him what he meant. So Sidney walked away out by the noble avenue of elms, that were now swaying and rustling in the summer breeze with a sound as of waves on some distant shore; and he kept looking along the broad, lilac-hued highway between the strips of green common that at any moment might become a more living picture by the appearance of tandem horses, and a tall dog-cart, and a smartly dressed young man. But the longer he walked the more he became

assured that Dick had not driven out to Crowhurst merely to make inquiries and leave a card ; other vehicles came along the Fair Mile, but not the tall dog-cart, and by the time he struck off at the Traveller's Rest, to make his way into the higher country, he knew that the visitor had been received, and was now doubtless being entertained.

And yet he wandered on, though the fresh-scented morning afforded him no kind of interest or delight. The soft country sounds—the far-off bleating of sheep, the flute-note of the cuckoo among the woods, the trilling of the larks unseen in the silver skies, the hollow footfalls of a horse trotting along some dusty highway—were but as a mockery of the feverish turmoil within his breast. He looked at the straggling hedges, with their stars of rose-pink, and cream-white, and blue ; and it seemed as if she had forsaken them and gone away. And what immeasurable and hopeless distance—what impassable silent gulf—was this that appeared to separate him from her ?—though every step was taking him, inadvertently or not, so much the nearer to the secluded house beyond the murmuring beeches.

Of course, if he had thought of the matter at all, he might have considered himself quite safe in adventuring into this neighbourhood ; for both Nan and her father would be occupied with their newly arrived guest. He ran no risk ; this empty world was all his own ; he could wander whither he pleased. And so it was, in aimlessly ascending these lonely heights, when he caught a glimpse of a girl's figure disappearing into a lane leading at right angles from the highway he was following, he asked himself in amazement if that could possibly be Nan. How could it be Nan ? The figure that had thus suddenly vanished was alone, and going in the opposite direction from Crowhurst ; whereas surely Nan would be busy indoors ? Nevertheless, he hastened his steps, marvelling if some miracle had befallen. For one thing, he knew that the unfrequented path along the top of the ridge, between the tall hedges, was a favourite resort of Nan's ; it was

high up above the rest of the landscape ; it commanded spacious views, and it was lonely. But if by some wild possibility this could be she, what had become of Dick Erridge and her father?—and on what errand could she be bent?

A minute or two brought him to the parting of the ways ; and here no one was visible, through the twisting of this secluded thoroughfare ; but he had no sooner hastened along to the first turning than he saw that this was indeed no other than Nan—some distance ahead of him—and walking slowly. He could have overtaken her almost at once ; but he hung back somehow. Perhaps there was something of profanation in his intruding upon her solitude ; perhaps the issues at stake were to him so tremendous that he did not care to imperil them by any rashness. She was not escaping from him. Instead of her usual free and light and eager step, her pace was slow and dilatory ; her head was slightly bent down, as if she was thinking over something ; she paid little heed to what was around her. Again and again he was on the point of going rapidly forward ; and then he feared he might alarm her ; would it not be simpler and more reassuring to her if he met her when she turned to come back ? For it was clear she was not bent on any definite errand.

Then by-and-by she turned aside from the middle of the highway and went up to a gate that bridged across a gap in the hedge. This gate opened into a wide field of wheat—the slowly moving glaucous-green showing here and there a sprinkling of scarlet poppies ; and beyond that again was a valley ; and beyond the valley a series of partly wooded heights rising and receding into the far horizon, with one solitary pale red mansion set among the soft green of the trees. And perhaps it was merely to look in absent mood across this stretch of country that she stood at the gate, her hands idly placed on the top bar ; yet even now he would not interrupt ; it would startle her less if she met him on her return.

But what presently happened was nearly scattering all this anxious consideration of his to the winds. Of a sudden she crossed her hands that were on the top bar of the gate ; she bent down her head over them, so that her face was hidden ; while the slim, girlish figure seemed to be shaken by a violent fit of weeping. What could this mystery mean ? Nan the light-hearted—the smiling-eyed—who had always appeared to him the very embodiment of all the gay and happy and radiant things of summer : how should she be overtaken by such a storm of grief ? This revelation terrified him ; he did not go forward to her, as had been his first quick impulse ; nay, he would almost sooner have retreated, and left her with her secret. But that break-down on the part of the girl was only momentary. She raised her head ; dried her eyes ; and set out on her walk again—this time with a more decided step. She went on until she came to another parting of the roads ; and then, as if this was the distance she had undertaken to complete, she turned, and set out for home again. Sidney was awaiting her, between the tall hedges.

As she drew near, having observed him, she was obviously constrained and embarrassed ; her eyes were downcast ; perhaps she would rather have gone by without a word ? But she answered his inquiries with regard to her father : Mr. Summers was getting on very well, though he was not allowed to move about much. Then, possibly to make excuse for her having left her patient, she explained that a friend had just come to spend the day at Crowhurst ; and that her father had at once seized this opportunity to send her for a walk. And then she held out her hand timidly, and said,

“ Good-bye ! ”

But he refused to see the furtively extended hand.

“ Oh, no, we cannot part like that,” said he, pleadingly, “ because—because I have something to say to you—I must speak—there is something I must tell you——”

She trembled a little ; her eyes were still averted ;

yet she did not seek to interrupt him, or to move away.

"Do you remember the first time I saw you?" he went on. "The very first time—at the gate of St. Mary's Church——"

All the white roses of her face grew pink; but she did not answer.

"Do you remember?" he said. "The children had been strewing flowers—you turned—and I saw you then for the first time. I met your eyes for a moment—when you hardly expected any one. Do you remember?"

"Yes, I remember," she said, in a low voice.

"Well, ever since that moment I have loved you. Nan—I have loved you—night and day thinking of you; and sometimes it seemed impossible to me that your heart could ever turn to me—it seemed far too much to hope for; and then again I tried to read things in your look—just a guess it was, now and again—and I did not despair so much."

And now he had hold of both her hands; and she did not withdraw them; some indefinable glamour of his presence seemed to be round her like a cloud, compelling her to remain.

"Nan, have you no word for me?" he said. "I offer you the whole love of my life: have you no word for me?"

The trembling fingers that he held so tight made no resistance; nay, she raised her face to his—and never had he so thrilled to the fascination of that fresh young loveliness; while all the answer he demanded was in her half-joyful, half-tearful eyes. He stooped his head: their lips met. A first kiss!—and all the world appeared to fall away from around them; and they were by themselves in a new universe; alone in some seventh heaven of exaltation—some hitherto undiscovered sphere that seemed all palpitating with wonder, and entrancement, and an aching over-joy of transport and commingling self-surrender.

"But you have not told me yet, Nan," said he, with one arm drawing her close to him, while with the other

hand he pushed back the loose waifs and curls of golden-brown hair that the wind had blown about her ears.

"I am with you, Sidney—I am here with you," she said—as though that were surely sufficient. And she called him "Sidney" as if by some happy and easy and natural instinct; perhaps it was as "Sidney" that she had been thinking of him in her mute maiden reveries.

"And do you know what you have done, Nan?" he said. "Do you know that you have given me all this wonderful treasure that I am holding—all these beautiful things become mine—your beautiful forehead, and all this beautiful hair, and the dear eyes—well, I think they told me something before you would. For you haven't told me even yet, Nan—you haven't said anything."

"But I am with you, Sidney: what more?" she made answer, as if she shrank from putting into definite words the confession his ears hungered to hear. "And only a little while ago, a few minutes ago, I was thinking I should never see you again."

"Was that when you were at the gate, Nan?" he asked, gently.

She looked up.

"Yes, I saw you," he continued. "I saw you were unhappy, and I did not like to intrude on you. I waited. I waited—but I did not dream that all this strange thing was so near—this great happiness to become mine—that is—that is, if you love me, Nan."

Another challenge it was: so impatient, and eager, and anxious he was for her shy avowal. She refused no longer.

"I love you, Sidney," she said, in a voice almost inaudible, even here amid the slumbering silence of the woods and the fields.

He kissed her forehead and her eyes; he kissed her hands; he did not know how to show his pride and his gratitude. Of what avail was speech, in shadowing forth ineffable things? To live was enough, with every succeeding moment filled to overflowing with the wild rapture of

possession—the beautiful head, “sunning over with curls,” clasped close to his bosom—her heart-throbs answering his own.

And then she withdrew herself from his embrace—he would not have her go—she must go—he besought her to stay—her eyes told him how willingly she would have remained.

And then again she looked around, at those luxuriant hedges where the bees were drowsily humming and the butterflies fluttering and alighting and fluttering on again, from pink to blue, from blue to crimson, from crimson to golden yellow.

“I should like to give you a white wild rose, Sidney,” she said, “if we could find one.”

“Will you, Nan?” said he—as if she had promised him all the jewelled splendours of the East.

They searched about—led astray frequently by the pale bells of the bindweed—but they could find no wild rose-bush up on these heights.

“Never mind,” said she. “I know where to find them, in the afternoon, when Mr. Erridge has gone; and I will get a messenger and send you one.”

“But may I not come up for it, Nan, in the evening?” said he. “You know, you cannot turn me away from Crowhurst any more. I claim you now. You belong to me.”

“Oh, no, indeed, Sidney, no, indeed,” she said, earnestly. “You must not think that. I belong to my father. Poor Dodo, he thinks a great deal too much of me, and I know I am useless enough to him, but still I must be with him, until he tells me to go. As for you, Sidney, I have given you my love—is not that enough?”

“Yes, indeed it is, Nan,” he answered her. “And I am not going to be so ungrateful as to ask for anything more—for the present, at least. Yes, yes; you must remain with your father—that is quite right—but you know you belong to me all the same, Nan—you are altogether mine—from every wisp and curl of that beautiful hair to the very

tip of the toe of your boot. And what is more," he continued, as they set out for Crowhurst—hand in hand, like boy and girl lovers—"when you reach home now, I am going in with you, to explain everything to your father——"

"Sidney!" she protested. "With Mr. Erridge in the house!"

"Oh, as for Dick Erridge," said he, with a quite reckless generosity, "don't you make any mistake, Nan. He is a capital fellow—an excellent fellow; there's a great deal of well-intentioned honest human nature about him. I don't think anybody would be better pleased than he would if we told him our secret. And why should it be a secret at all? I should like all the world to know it!"

"But I would rather not, Sidney," she said, with shy lowering of the eyes.

And when they reached the white gate he was still for going boldly in and telling everybody—but especially Mr. Summers—of the great event that had happened; but she persuaded him to refrain; she herself would tell her father, when there was no visitor in the house, and the ways were clear. Well, he was content; he was ready to obey her in everything; his heart was far too full of joy and gratitude to enable him to question the propriety of anything she might suggest or demand. So he bade her farewell; and he would have kissed her again, but she apprehensively drew back—for this highway was more open than the secret and sacred path between the tall hedges; and presently, with his long swinging stride, he was making his way through the beechwoods, not yet capable of realising all the splendour of good fortune and happiness that had come into his life, but narrowing himself down to the white wild rose that he would look for and wait for, minute by minute, half-hour by half-hour, all through the afternoon.

Yet the afternoon had drawn on towards evening ere tidings arrived from Crowhurst; and these were brought, not by any messenger bearing a mystic love-token, but by Dick Erridge driving his tandem pair. The two young men

ran across each other in Hart Street, by the church ; and Dick at once pulled up.

"This time, now," said he, "are you free to dine with me—Red Lion—say the word, and I'll hand the trap over to my man—and I'll get home by rail, or I don't mind if I stay the night. You've never given me the chance before——"

Well, Sidney gave him the chance now, and right gladly : why, here was the only creature in the whole universe who could talk to him about the Summerses, who could tell him something about Nan, who had but a little while ago been in the same room with her, observant of her looks and ways and dress. And overjoyed was Dick, too, when he discovered he was at last to have an opportunity of showing that he knew what was what. He sent away the dog-cart in charge of his groom ; he walked into the hotel, and seemed to take possession of the whole place ; he secured a private sitting-room overlooking the river ; the head waiter received his instructions, minute, elaborate, and sagacious ; and then, as Dick declared, there was nothing for it but a *filet d'anchois*, a glass of sherry and bitters, and a stroll down to the bridge—these as an appetiser—while the banquet was being prepared. Moreover, when they did at length sit down to this meal, which was quite unnecessarily sumptuous for a warm summer evening, Dick was in good case : the host is happily situated who can talk to his guest about the one thing, out of all the things in the world, concerning which the guest most wishes to hear.

"And he wanted to hide it from her !" Dick continued, referring to the puma affair, about which he was exultingly enthusiastic. "Fancy doing a swell thing, a magnificent thing like that for any one, and then trying to hide it ! But Miss Nan found out—trust her, when once she was on the scent !—she got the whole story from the menagerie fellow ; and lucky it was for him, by-the-way, that no greater mischief was done. Gad, I should like to ha' seen that set-to ! A puma is a kind of leopard, isn't it ?—a

powerful beast, no doubt; but Jim Summers's shoulders weren't given to him for nothing——"

"But why Jim?" broke in Sidney, with angry impatience. "What has the poor man done that he must be called Jim?"

"Oh, I beg your pardon," said Dick, most humbly. "Mr. Summers, of course. Very sorry; a slip o' the tongue, that's all. And as I was saying, I'd like to have seen him pin down that beast—that was a grip!—do you think there's another man in England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales could have done that? But then, you see, he was driven mad by fearing there might harm come to the girl; and that's enough for Jim—for Mr. Summers: raise a finger against her—and then, by all the powers, ware hawk!"

He helped himself to the claret liberally.

"And I should like well to ha' seen that bit of a scrimmage in the Fair Mile," he went on, in the same ecstatic vein. "What a piece of luck your happening to be there! I tell you, it would just have pleased me—it would have pleased me down to the ground—to see the first navy get that oner—by gad, he must have thought he had struck against a volcano, or a runaway mountain, or something. Brought him up rather sharp, didn't it?" he proceeded, with a chuckle of intensest satisfaction. "Like a bluebottle buzzing along—happy as a king—laughing at its own jokes—and all of a sudden it bangs its noddle against a window-pane: that's what they call bringing up sharp, don't you know! I wonder how the navy liked it? I could ha' warned the beggar. I'd have said to him, 'Now don't you put a hand on Ji—on Mr. Summers's daughter; you'd better not do that; it would be far wiser for you to go away, to go away altogether, and sit quietly in the shade, and make pretty rosy-posies out of daisies and buttercups. That will be a great deal wholesomer for you than trying to put a hand on Miss Anne Summers.' And he went down with a crack, did he? Lie long?"

"I did not wait to see, to tell you the truth," Sidney responded. "I dare say the other fellows lugged him along to the Traveller's Rest, and patched him together with gin."

"Couldn't do that," said Dick, with suspicious promptitude. "The Traveller's Rest has only a beer license. They must have taken him on to the Red Cross."

"It seemed to me a very scientific bit of business," Sidney observed. "I never saw two men so beautifully bowled over right and left."

"Oh, he's handy with his fists," Dick Erridge said, evasively. And then he added: "By-the-way, have you seen how Tim Mulligan is vapouring all round the shop, over there in San Francisco, with his challenge for ten thousand dollars a side? But what George Slater says is quite right. Let him come over here if he wants the match; Parkes will find the money easy enough; and England should be the headquarters; I say England should be the headquarters—the country of Gentleman Jackson, and Shaw the Life Guardsman, and Bendigo, and Ben Caunt, and Tom Sayers. Let him come over here. We'll make up a purse to any extent he likes——"

"Did you notice what a fine show of roses they have at Crowhurst now?" said Sidney, to whom San Francisco and pugilism were topics of too remote an interest. And therewith the young man, amid his eager and assiduous duties as host, brought the conversation back to this immediate neighbourhood, and to Miss Anne's garden, and to her appearance, her pursuits, her affection for her father, and so on, and so on; and little did he know how sweet and grateful was the sauce he was adding to those dishes which he so earnestly recommended.

And meanwhile had the messenger—the grave old Scotch gardener? or the smart little page-boy? or a maidservant despatched on excuse of some other errand—brought down a certain inestimable treasure from the far woodland heights? Sidney grew anxious and preoccupied—protested against their lingering over the wine—proposed a cigarette out-of-

doors instead. And to this Dick Erridge at once assented ; he was ready for anything ; he was happy ; he had acquitted himself well ; he knew that his little dinner had been a success.

When they went outside they found that the twilight had not yet gone from the world ; the lads of the village were still seated on the parapet of the bridge, their legs dangling over the water, while they criticised the performances of the white-costumed eights that shot ghostlike through the gathering dusk. As Sidney and his companion walked idly along the river-side they came at length to Lilac Lodge ; and here Sidney asked to be excused for a moment. He passed through the garden ; he opened the door. On the hall table there lay a small oblong parcel—a pasteboard box apparently, neatly tied up in white paper—and addressed to himself. He knew what this contained ; but he would not open it now ; he would choose a more cryptic moment, when the night had come, and he was alone. But it was with a proud heart that he returned to this chance acquaintance of his ; and sometimes, while he was dutifully listening to Dick's observations on mankind and their various sports and occupations, his thoughts would fly away out to the solitude of the beechwoods, and inwardly he was saying : "Yes, sweetheart, I have your message—as pure, and sweet, and beautiful as yourself. And are you still wandering about in the garden, and thinking ; or has the night driven you in-doors ?"

Here by the river silence had not yet fallen, though the yellow gas lamps were now visible through the trees. Still there came a dull clank of oars from out of the gray shadows along the stream ; and there was a crunching of footfalls on the sandy road ; and remote voices, becoming indistinct. And still Dick Erridge chatted gaily on ; he was pleased with himself and all the universe ; he had re-established himself ; he had shown he was not the "bounder" he looked on the occasion of his calling at Lilac Lodge, dressed up in the garments of some friendly waiter.

CHAPTER XIII.

UNTIL TO-MORROW.

THE long invalid-chair of wicker-work, forming a kind of couch, was out here in the garden. Nan was seated by the side of it, on a low stool, and, with head bent down and in half-murmured tones, she was making confession to her father of all that had occurred that morning between Sidney Hume and herself. She did not once look up. She knew nothing of what was passing in this man's face; she saw nothing of the dreams and the renunciation that were in his patient, sad eyes; she did not even notice that his clenched right hand, resting on the arm of the chair, trembled somewhat. In profoundest silence he listened to her, to the last word; and even then he did not immediately answer her.

"Are you angry, Dodo?" she asked, in the same low voice.

He roused himself instantly. "Angry, Nan?" he said, with the greatest cheerfulness. "Angry? This would be a pretty time for anger, when you come to tell me that you have got a sweetheart!—and that one just about the handsomest and best-dispositioned young fellow you could have found in the whole country. A splendid fellow—straightforward—honest—no showing off—and good-natured if good-nature was ever declared in any one's manner. Hardly a time for anger, is it? Rather a time for congratulations, I should say. And—and when are we to have the wedding, Nan?"

She started in surprise. "The wedding, Dodo?" she exclaimed. "There was no talk of any wedding. A wedding that would take me away from you?"

"Well?" said he, with bland encouragement. "Well; we must look forward to that, you know. It's the way of the world—I've told you again and again. Young people

must live their lives. Old people can't be expected to live their own lives and to claim the young people's lives as well ; that would hardly be fair, would it ? ”

“ But you don't understand, Dodo,” she said, almost piteously. “ All that I have been telling you happened quite unforeseen—no one dreamed of it beforehand. The fact was I—I thought I was never to see him again—and I was very miserable, Dodo, and that is the truth—and then meeting him in this way——”

“ And that just shows you how I mismanage things for you, Nan,” said he. “ Here I send you out by yourself—when you were in great trouble—and I did not even know you were in trouble——”

“ I did not intend to tell you,” she murmured.

“ But doesn't that prove that you want some one nearer your own age to comprehend you and sympathise with you ? ” said he, with great gentleness. “ Isn't that clear enough ? You see I haven't been able to manage very well for you, Nan, with all my scheming—if you have to go away for a solitary walk—very wretched and miserable—thinking about what is troubling you—and not able to tell any one. And perhaps you were crying too ? ” he added, watching her in a timid and furtive way.

She hung her head.

“ You see there's where it is, Nan,” he went on. “ I'm so stupid. You want some one nearer your own age.”

“ I shall never have any one be as kind to me as you have been ! ” she said, passionately. “ Never—never—never ! But what I want you to understand, Dodo, is this : all I have been telling you that happened this morning came about by accident ; it could not have been foreseen or avoided. But marriage is quite different. Marriage is something that can be put aside, if one wishes. And I am not going to leave you, Dodo, so long as you care to have me with you : will you remember ? ”

“ Very well, very well,” said he, and he put his hand on the soft, golden-brown hair. “ I don't mean to drive you

out of the house just yet. The time will come soon enough—all right, and natural, and as it should be. And there's another thing, Nan. I mentioned to you one or two reasons why I thought our acquaintanceship with Mr. Hume should be dropped. But then, you see, that was assuming there was nothing else than acquaintanceship betwixt you and him ; and now that it is all changed, now that he is your sweetheart, Nan, and will some day be your husband, well, you must entirely forget what I said about him and his family. I was exaggerating, I dare say—making mountains out of molehills. People are reasonable, after all. And he will see that you are not put into any false position—trust him for that—he has a shrewd head on young shoulders. And he'll be so proud of you, Nan, that he won't let any one treat you but with respect. He has got some independence—some firmness—oh, yes, yes : he will see that his wife has not to run the gauntlet of any prejudice——”

“But I am not his wife as yet, Dodo,” she said, with flushed forehead. “I am only your daughter.”

“And a very good daughter, too,” said he, blithely, though his eyes looked tired. “Now give me your arm until I get on my legs. Dinner must be about ready.” Then, as they went together towards the house, he said : “Why, don't you know that you always put an extra value on anything that is yours when you see some one else value it as well ? And I am quite proud that my Nan should be appreciated—yes, indeed ; something added on. You're a person of importance now, Nan—you with your young lover, handsome and clever and bold. And poor Dick Erridge—what is to become of him ?”

“Ah, that was never possible, Dodo,” she said, as they entered the house, “though once or twice I thought of it with a fancy that it might please you.”

Next morning again he was clearly nervous and troubled, though he endeavoured to preserve a gay demeanour. “Do you expect a visitor to-day, Nan ?” he said at breakfast, regarding her with affectionate scrutiny. “Surely

your hair is a little trimmer than usual—not quite so wild and rebellious. And what hour are you looking forward to—five o'clock, for custom's sake, or four, if you allow for a little impatience, or perhaps even mid-day? Or what do you say—what do you say, Nan, to twelve?"

"He would have come in to see you yesterday, Dodo," she said, with downcast lashes, "only that Mr. Erridge was here."

"Oh, I don't approve of formal interviews," said he, cheerfully—"not in the least. What is the use of them? The thing is done. You and he have settled it between you—all quite right and satisfactory; you and he are the important people. Why should I be expected to interfere or cause embarrassment? No, no; I will take care there sha'n't be any embarrassment for anybody."

Nevertheless, between eleven and twelve, as he was seated in the dining-room watching Nan put nasturtiums and sweetbrier into the flower-tubes on the table, a footfall outside summoned that apprehensive look back into his face again. "Nan," said he, quietly, "will you go out into the garden for a minute or two?"

She left, and the young man entered; but Mr. Summers at once cut short his explanations and apologies for having 'stole Bonny Glenlyon away.'

"It might have been wiser if you had looked elsewhere for a wife," said he, gravely; "but then, as you say, sometimes these things happen without set intention; and in any case, since you two have pledged yourselves to each other, then that is done; and I ought to be glad of it, for it makes Nan's future secure if anything should happen to me. I think you will be kind to her; and if you are, one thing is certain, she will not be ungrateful."

"But why should you talk of Nan being left in that way?" Sidney protested. "Why should you make such gloomy forecasts?"

"I like to think that everything is prepared and made safe and secure where Nan is concerned," he went on.

"And, as I tell you, you won't find her ungrateful for kindness. She's a brave lass ; she's not one of the whimperers. She is naturally light-hearted, and the best and happiest companion a man ever had. Well, why should I preach to you about Nan ? You'd better go and talk to her yourself. You'll find her in the garden."

And Sidney would at once and gladly have accepted this invitation, only that, having eyes as well as another, he could not but perceive that on the table was a tray with a lot of cut nasturtiums and sprays of sweetbrier, while several of the flower-tubes were empty.

"But I am afraid I may be interrupting her," he said, with some hesitation. "It was really you that I was impatient to see at this unusual hour."

"Oh no, you won't interrupt her," her father said. "And the longer you keep her out in the open air and the sunlight the better. That is the proper place for Nan and for the roses in her cheeks. She's far too much given to hanging and dawdling about me, when all I want is to sit still and give this slung arm of mine perfect rest. Now that's not the kind of a thing for a young girl at all. She should have plenty of active exercise—driving about, walking about, running, climbing, with fun and merriment. You go and make her ramble about the garden, and cheer her up. Tell her she is not wanted in-doors at all. Why should she bother about these rags of flowers ? What is the use of paying wages to maidservants if they can't get the rooms ready ?"

He spoke quite angrily ; he took up the newspaper, so that his visitor might know he was dismissed ; then, when the younger man had left the room, he resumed his seat. But he did not keep his attention fixed on the newspaper for long. Presently it dropped by his side. His eyes were staring blankly before him, with visions and recollections in them. Or perhaps he was vaguely listening, here in the cool shadow of the room, near the open window ? Yet what could he gather of the wide world without, save the

chirping of birds, the stirring of the honeysuckle, the hum of bees, that made the universal silence seem remote? The lovers were away by themselves now, eager and busy and joyful with their own affairs; and he was alone. By-and-by there was a soft sound of footsteps on the path outside. He snatched up the newspaper and assumed an air of pre-occupied interest; it was the sporting intelligence he was apparently studying—how Michigan had been entered for the Royal Handicap at Leicester, and John Gilpin for the Cesarewitch and the Cambridgeshire. And then those footfalls faded away again; the paper dropped from his hand; and his eyes were once more thoughtful and sad—but not quite so sombre as they had been. For, even as the lovers passed, he had caught some tone or two of Nan's voice; and surely there was a fine and happy cheerfulness there. He rang the bell, and with a kind of humility asked the maidservant if she did not think she could finish putting the flowers in the glasses—so that Miss Anne should not be hurried when she came in from the garden.

And meanwhile what amazing discoveries those young people were making, as they strayed about in that wonder-land of sweet scents, and glowing colours, and basking sunlight! Two lifetimes to be conned over: and in the give and take of personal experience and opinion each kept disclosing to the other a succession of marvels, of absorbing interest even in the smallest particulars. Of what did they not talk, in these swift-flying moments—of pansies, and poppies, and Wordsworth's daffodils, of Herrick, and Lovelace, and Suckling, of 'Kubla Khan,' and 'St. Agnes' Eve,' of Cumnor Hall over there in Berkshire and the hapless Amy Robsart, of Lorenzo and Jessica, and the magic Italian night—anything, everything—it mattered little—so long as all the wonder of all the world shone in the rose-tints of her cheek and all heaven seemed to open to him in the blue depths of her eyes. Perhaps, like most young men of the day, he was but indifferently acquainted

with Burns ; but his mother could have put him on the right track :

*'I gaed a waefu' gate yestreen,
A gate, I fear, I'll dearly rue ;
I gat my death frae twa sweet een,
Twa lovely een o' bonnie blue.*

*'Twas not her golden ringlets bright,
Her lips like roses wat wi' dew,
Her heaving bosom lily-white—
It was her een sae bonnie blue.*

*'She talked, she smiled, my heart she wiled,
She charmed my soul I wist na how,
And ay the stound, the deadly wound,
Cam frae her een sae bonnie blue.'*

And to him, in this first intimate intercommunion of souls, it seemed as though he were exploring some virgin forest, coming upon new beauties and new miracles at every turn ; while there were entrancing strains in these mysterious groves—no other than the soft musical diphthongs of her speech, the lengthened d-ow-n and t-ow-n and n-o-w ; it was all a kind of dream, only that when she gave him a rose he took her hands in his and held them, and they were real enough, pulsating with happiness, and warm. Then again he found to his amazement that she had never been out of her native land—had never beheld the sun rise over the red islands of the Gulf of Ægina, with the pale columns of the Parthenon on the distant height—nor lain out on the lagoon, watching the procession of gondolas go through the darkness like a golden snake, while a colder radiance began to steal over the frontage of S. Giorgio—nor looked down upon the spacious Conca d'Oro, with its dark green orange groves seeming to tremble through the luminous summer heat ; and here also there were large schemes and imaginative possibilities, suggesting the time when these two lives, hitherto so unaccountably separated, should flow together, in one consentient and happy channel. But Nan rather drew back from these visionary projects. Was not the

present and immediate hour all that human hearts could wish? And they had so much to confide to each other!

Of a sudden she pulled out her small trinket of a watch.

"Oh, Sidney, what a shame!" she cried. "We have kept luncheon twenty minutes!—and never a word from poor Dodo—no, of course not, never a word! Quick, quick, let us go in!"

"Yes, I will make my apologies, and say good-bye, and be off at once," he said, as he hurried along with her to the house.

But that was not at all Mr. Summers's idea. He had directed the parlour-maid to put places for three at the luncheon-table; and when the young people went in-doors, he was waiting for them, with an invitation for Sidney Hume which was most gratefully accepted. Furthermore, he seemed rather inclined to offer excuses to his guest for any possible deficiency; he explained that they had been put to some little inconvenience through being unable to drive in to Henley; but now the phaeton had been sent home, and there would be no trouble in the future. For what was he apologising, then?—the absence of cold tongue, or some particular kind of pickle? Chipped flints would have been welcomed by the young lover so long as he was allowed to take his place opposite Nan.

"Now, Dodo," she said, as soon as they had sat down, "I am going to talk seriously to you. You are always telling me that there is nothing like sunlight and fresh air—always insisting on my being in the open—invaluable for the health and spirits; and yet here have you been in-doors all this beautiful morning——"

"I am rather afraid of the heat, Nan," he said, uneasily. "It would be very awkward, you know, if any kind of inflammation were to be set up: I think the cool shade of the rooms is better."

"And do you mean to say, Dodo," she exclaimed, "that you are not going to drive in to Henley with me this

afternoon, on the very first day the phaeton has come home ? ”

“ I am rather afraid the shaking wouldn't do my arm any good, Nan, and that's the fact,” said he. “ The doctor is so particular about rest and quiet. But I was thinking you might give Mr. Hume a bit of a lift—just to show him how your Captain can go—that is, if he is not ashamed to sit behind such a circus-looking beast——”

“ Oh, to hear such things about my beautiful Captain ! ” she cried. And then she looked across the table. “ Sidney, what do you say ? ”

“ Well, yes, I think he is a beautiful creature,” he declared, boldly, “ though I've never seen him in the shafts, you know.”

“ Oh, he can go—he can go—and with a very pretty action too,” Mr. Summers said ; and thus it was he got it arranged that he should stay at home, while Nan would drive her lover in to Henley, by way of the Fair Mile.

And very proud was Sidney to be so driven. He, also, thought she had a good style in the handling of reins and whip—when he chanced to pay attention to such matters. But in fact he was now engaged in telling her all about his family—and about the three beautiful Miss Hays—and about Thomas the Rhymer and his Teviot-side prophecy—and similar things. Above all he spoke of his mother, talking in extravagant terms of her wit and shrewdness, her gracious manner, her striking figure and distinguished appearance ; and clearly it had become the first wish of his heart that Mrs. Hume, as soon as she returned to Henley, which was to be on the following Monday, should come away out to Crowhurst, and make the acquaintance of both father and daughter, and see for herself what treasure of a bride he had discovered amid the quiet inland woods. Nan did not respond so joyfully to this proposition. She was silent for a second or two ; but presently the brisk motion and the flying air and the sunlight had brought back her

spirits again ; and she was laughing with her speedwell-blue eyes.

Alas ! this was but a sorry parting in the main thoroughfare of Henley, on a Saturday afternoon, with lots of idlers lounging about. But at least he had secured for himself the whole of the next day ; he was to go out to Crowhurst early, and bring with him the engravings and miniatures of which he had been telling her ; and the quiet hours would go by in the still garden. And so, with another look interchanged between those two, he left her and walked away home.

Nevertheless, this ineffectual farewell haunted him with a sense of dissatisfaction and disappointment. He could not bring himself to hunt out those engravings—of the three Miss Hays, of the old tower on Teviot-side, and the like. He went out again, and for a little while stood looking at the busy river ; but all the beauty and the quick-glancing life of it—the restless poplars, the yellow bridge, the shimmering water, the long and shapely boats shooting by in their lustrous bronze—had no interest for him. He strolled along until he came in view of the open space of Hart Street ; but she had left Hart Street ; the Stanhope phaeton was no longer visible. He continued on until he reached Bell Street ; and here he was just in time to intercept her—the small groom, having executed the last of his commissions, was crossing the pavement to return to his perch.

“ I want to be with you as long as I can,” Sidney said to her ; and he got up and took his seat beside her without further ceremony.

And again he said,

“ You know, bidding good-bye in the middle of Henley is not good-bye at all.”

“ Why not ? ” she asked ; but there was no answer ; and presently they had left the town and were driving along the Fair Mile, the broad thoroughfare barred across by the sunlight and the shadows of the lofty elms.

At the Traveller's Rest the road begins to ascend ; and at this point he and she surrendered the charge of the vehicle to the groom, that the horse might be walked up the hill, while they leisurely proceeded on foot. But before they reached the much rougher road that strikes off at right angles to lead away towards the heights, skirting as it does so one of the great beech-woods, they came upon a path that intersects this wood, and naturally they followed that, proposing to rejoin the phaeton at the summit. A few yards of advance, and they already found around them a perfect silence of leaves and tall stems and bracken ; a prevailing twilight, also, save that here and there shafts of afternoon sunshine fell slantwise on the tangled undergrowth, and now and again the stirring of the topmost branches of the beeches showed a gleam of blue. Here, indeed, was a more fitting place to say farewell than the main thoroughfare of a small provincial town ; here in a hushed, mysterious stillness seeming to shut out all the rest of the world. And 'until to-morrow' is easily said ; and fervent assurances and reassurances and faithful vows come quickly when the heart is surcharged with them ; and the moments are all too short that are given over to passionate embraces, and sweet kisses, and devouring looks. But all the while—shut their ears as they might—they were haunted by an inexorable sound, the sound of wheels outside on the steep and flinty road. And so at length they had to tear themselves asunder, with some lingering last glances that spoke of ineffable things. When, finally, they emerged into the bewildering daylight—finding themselves just ahead of the slow-dragging phaeton—it must have seemed to them as if they had been wandering in some dim, enchanted forest, such as poets tell of.

CHAPTER XIV.

BONDS AND COILS.

"OH, I will give it him—I will give it him well!" said Mrs. Hume, as the afternoon train was drawing near to Henley. "Leaving two poor lone women all by themselves in London, and running away to Cappadocia, or Upper Egypt, or some such place, hunting for Greek stage-bills——"

"But, I can understand the fascination," said Lady Helen, contentedly looking out on the placid landscape. "Indeed, I think I must have caught a little of the infection myself. I find the British Museum quite interesting now; and I never see a handful of old seals and rings in a shop-window without wondering whether there might not be a Greek gem amongst them—one of those archaic ones, you know, with the long skeleton figures. This intaglio I have got for him—this Hercules and the lion—looks all right, I imagine; it cannot be quite modern, anyway, for the grooves in the sard are polished as perfectly as the surface——"

"Ah, Helen, dear," observed her companion, in sentimental fashion, "he will never value anything so much as the Santa Maura ring you gave him in exchange for that little keepsake I see you still wear. And that reminds me; sometimes I think I shall never die happy until he and you and I—just the three of us—go away on a yachting cruise through those Greek islands. You can do it so easily now; steamer to Corfu, then hire the yacht there, and off you go to Santa Maura, and Ithaca, and the Gulf of Patras, and Lepanto. *Non cuivis homini*, you know; it isn't given to everybody to go to Corinth—in a hundred-ton schooner; but I would live on potatoes and milk all the rest of my life to secure myself such a delicious voyage. Wouldn't that be a chance for you and him to search about for old Greek gems!—and who knows, perhaps a poor body like

myself might pick up a little bit of modern silver embroidery. And don't you think he would make a capital guide for us, if we went across to Tiryns and Mycenae?"

Lady Helen was discreetly silent; for this proposal seemed mysteriously to involve something else. In what capacity was she expected to form one of that travelling trio? It was a question she could neither ask nor answer.

But now the train was slowing into the station; and of a sudden Mrs. Hume, happening to cast her eyes forward, joyfully called out:

"Why, here he is! Here is a piece of condescension! Here is the rascal himself, come along to meet us." And then she added, with a laugh: "There's one thing about those brats of mine—they're easy to recognize at a distance, the lasses as well as the lads. They're *geyan kenspeckle*, as their forefathers would have said."

And amidst her motherly pride and admiration, when this tall and handsome son of hers came forward to open the door for them, she forgot all about the terrible scolding she had undertaken to administer; and Lady Helen, too, received him with a favouring glance and smile.

"I saw your carriage outside the station," he said to her, "and I guessed you would be coming by this train."

"Well," she said to him, "I have been telling Mrs. Hume that she might as well drive on at once with me to the Hall, and then we could go on the river, and have a look at the house-boats——"

She hesitated.

"Would you like me to go with you?" he said, dutifully. "The punt you have is more comfortable for ladies than a hired boat—and I could pole it along for you——"

"Will you be so kind?" said she, with pleasant and grateful eyes; and in a minute or two, when the footman had brought their things from the railway-carriage, they found themselves in the open barouche, driving along by the busy river, and through the no less busy town which

was all bedecked now with bunting at the headquarters of the various rowing-clubs.

The strangest thing was that on this first glimpse of her after some little time of absence she had looked unexpectedly and unaccountably old. Very elegant-looking, no doubt, and refined ; the pale features, the beautifully arched eyebrows, the conscious gray eyes with their dark lashes, and the fine bulk of her raven-black hair, all very effective and striking ; but there was no fascination—there was no bewilderment—there was no glamour and radiance as of youth and sunshine—nothing to cause the heart to tremble with the mere sense of proximity. He recalled certain speculations of his, in the self-communion of solitary evening hours at Lilac Lodge ; and now these speculations seemed to him to have been not ‘ sane ’ at all, but quite the reverse of that, and impracticable, and futile, and hopeless. Yet she was most gracious to him. When he accidentally addressed her as Lady Helen, she appeared a little bit surprised, and even amused ; but she made no protest. She told him of the intaglio she had picked up for him, and hoped it was a good one, though it was not like anything she could find figured in Baron Stosch’s work. She offered to postpone the survey of the house-boats if he thought the poling of the punt would be oppressively warm work ; for indeed along the river-valley the heat was considerable, there being not a breath of wind—even up on the wooded heights the blue columns of smoke from this or that red-tiled mansion rose without deflection into the golden afternoon. And she would have both Mrs. Hume and Sidney promise to come and dine at Monks-Hatton Hall on the Friday evening, the better to see the illuminations.

When they reached the Hall, she begged to be excused for half a minute, that she might go and report her arrival to her mother ; and accordingly they went into the library to wait for her. And no sooner had she left them than Mrs. Hume addressed her son, in something of an undertone.

"Well, Mr. Sid," said she, "I hope you feel properly crushed and penitent?"

He turned from the books and the busts, and regarded her with a glance of inquiry.

"I must say dear Helen is the most forgiving and good-natured creature in the world," Mrs. Hume went on. "And it is all the more surprising in a girl who is so much sought after—and who has got so much independence of character. Why, any other girl would have been most indignant; your treatment of her has been really too bad; and yet here she comes down from town, and meets you, and is as amiable and friendly as ever; and she has been hunting in the old shops for cameos for you; and I am almost certain she has given Captain Erle his congé at last."

"My treatment of her?" he repeated, in a vaguely astonished way. But he could say nothing further; for at this moment Lady Helen appeared, followed by a servant bringing cushions for the punt. And so they passed through the open French windows, and went down the steps, and crossed the spacious lawn leading to the river-side, where they found the shining bronze-hued craft that was to take them away on their tour of inspection.

Nevertheless as he proceeded to pilot them through the intricacies of the swarming river—now pausing to watch a swinging eight go by, and again making way for a couple of maidens paddling their own canoe with a happy disregard of all surroundings—the phrase his mother had used haunted him. His treatment of Lady Helen? What had he done? Or left undone? What had she been generously pleased to forgive? It is true he had come away from town in the midst of the gaieties of the season; but he had played the part of squire of dames for a considerable while; and he did not regard himself as pledged to remain in that office for ever and ever. All the same these insinuations and reproaches of Mrs. Hume caused him some disquiet; and he accompanied the two ladies on their visits—for they soon found themselves among friends—in a

perfunctory fashion. If there was any mystery of entanglement or error he was impatient to have it cleared up at once—so that the promiscuous chatter of these people over tea and cake, and ices and strawberries, had no sort of interest for him.

An opportunity arrived in due course. When, their visiting over, they returned to the Hall, Lady Helen was for ordering the carriage to take them home; but Mrs. Hume would not hear of such a thing; she and her long lad of a son, she said, would walk back to Lilac Lodge. And hardly had these two set out than she reverted to the very subject that had been occupying his mind.

“Yes, indeed,” she said, “Helen has shown herself most forgiving—most forgiving. I could hardly have expected it of her; for she is proud, and impetuous, and wilful; she has plenty of spirit and independence. I shouldn’t have been at all surprised if she had received you in a very different manner this afternoon.”

“Now what is all this about?” he demanded—for he was simple and direct of speech himself, and therefore intolerant of mystification.

“What is it all about?” she repeated. “You don’t know? When your going away from London like that, and remaining away, might very easily have led any one to imagine that the engagement between you and her was broken off.”

“The engagement? What engagement?” said he, midway between anger and stupefaction.

“You must be quite well aware,” said she, but without meeting his eyes, “that every one assumes there is an engagement between Helen Yorke and you.”

“Then every one assumes all wrong,” he made answer, bluntly. “There is nothing of the kind. And I am not responsible for what a lot of idiots may assume.”

“Nor am I,” his mother said, with simple dignity. “It is enough for me if Helen herself assumes that there is an engagement.”

"Oh, and I am not to have any say in the matter!" he exclaimed.

"I do not know what you may have said, or left unsaid," she rejoined, quickly. "It is not always by spoken words that understandings are arrived at, and the course of lives shaped. No engagement? Sidney—my dear child! Well, you know that I am no eavesdropper or spy; and that night, at Lady Kenrick's, when I was seeking you and Helen, to get you away, I should certainly not have gone into the conservatory, if I had known I should find you two standing there with clasped hands."

"Oh, that was only a piece of tomfoolery," he said, with impatience. "A compact—about calling each other by our Christian name——"

"And is that nothing?" said this tall and statuesque and silver-haired lady, whose voice was suave. "And is the exchanging of keepsakes nothing—and wearing them ostentatiously? Why, what do you suppose those people on the river thought this afternoon, when they found Helen going about with us?—what but that the old relationship which was notorious enough in London had been resumed, as was natural, when she came down to Henley. Come, come, Sidney! I know that young people like to have their secrets; but you cannot expect me to be blinder than the rest of the world; and all I wished to say, and all I wish to say now, is that Helen is a dear good girl, who has far more forgiveness in her composition than I could have hoped for."

Now he had no heart to quarrel with his mother; for he was very fond and proud of her; but he felt that he was being wound round in coils that were none of his twisting; and instinctively he grew restive and resentful and indignant. As they were crossing the garden to enter the house, he said to her—

"Look here, Mater, let's have an end of this. I tell you, there has never been a single word of love-making between Helen Yorke and me, nor anything else that could

be misconstrued into love-making. And there are other reasons why there never could be any engagement between us, as I will explain to you some other time——”

She had reached the open door; and she turned and faced him—for he seemed rather inclined to remain in the garden; and the penetrating regard of this august dame had no kind of fear in it.

“Misconstruction?” she said, in a measured and incisive way. “It appears to me, my dear Sidney, that those who give ground for misconstruction are bound to make what reparation they can—the only reparation possible where a young lady’s name is concerned. I say you are bound in honour to Helen Yorke; I say your honour is at stake, even if there were nothing else to be considered. Yes, and I will say this, too, that I never yet heard—no, nor did any one ever yet hear—of a Hay or a Hume drawing back, where his honour was involved.” And therewith she turned and swept away from him: she knew that her words had struck deep.

At first indeed he was all aflame with rage—for his common-sense was up in indignant revolt; yet his wrath was directed not so much against his mother as against the contrariety of circumstances and the stupidity and malignant intermeddling of mankind. Nay, at this very moment, he was for going right away back to Lady Helen herself, and demanding of her if anything in his conduct towards her could justify in the remotest degree such an amazing misinterpretation. But calmer counsels prevailed. Might not Lady Helen also have been among the purblind piecing insignificant things together, and fashioning impossible horoscopes? Might not she, too, be inclined to say, with the same incomprehensible irrelevance, that never Hay nor Hume was known to draw back, where his honour was involved? It was altogether a maddening imbroglio—with no way out clearly visible.

At dinner not one syllable was said of this over-brooding subject; Mrs. Hume—knowing that her words would be

well remembered—had now returned to her ordinary mood of brisk good humour; she was telling him all about the other members of her scattered family, their plans for the autumn, and what not. He listened attentively enough; perhaps thinking in a forlorn way of his own little plan, which he had hoped to put in execution at once, for bringing about a meeting between his mother and his peerless Nan; and probably cursing the fatuity and perversity with which the best-laid schemes ‘gang aft agley.’ This was not an auspicious moment to ask a critical-eyed, exacting, and somewhat dictatorial mother to go away out into the solitude of the beechwoods, to make the acquaintance of the roseate, shining, summer-natured Princess he had discovered there.

After dinner, Mrs. Hume having her own affairs to attend to, he wandered out by himself in the twilight, and strolled down to the river-side. And now all the sleepy languor of the afternoon had fled; there was a fresh and cool breeze rustling and bending the tall Lombardy poplars and tossing the drooping tresses of the willows on the lawns; while the aquatic world had woke up to a new life—eights, fours, and pairs, dingheys, steam-launches and canoes interweaving warp and woof on the bosom of the stream. Spectators were clustered on the bridge; damsels on horseback were scampering through the meadows, with an occasional pull-up to look at a passing crew; the swans, in unmolested reaches, appeared to be holding mysterious converse with the bottom, but nevertheless keeping an alert eye for anything tossed them from the bank; while here and there an azure or crimson-jacketed youth, oblivious of all this varied activity, would leisurely ply his pair of sculls, fondly regarding Schön-Rohtraut in the stern—Schön-Rohtraut in the lightest-hued of boating costumes, with the tiller ropes brought idly over her shoulder. The golden light had now gone from the evening skies; a silver-gray dusk was stealing over the wide pastures and the wooded uplands. It seemed a peaceable,

happy, contented kind of universe to live in—if only there were no busybodies indulging in monstrous suppositions, and malignant circumstances destroying one's pet schemes.

But after all he was going out to Crowhurst next morning; and out to Crowhurst next morning he accordingly went; there compensation awaited him, and assurance, and the gladdest of welcomes. Yet no sooner had he arrived than he was bidden to depart; for Nan was ordered to take him away for a long drive on so fine a morning; Mr. Summers's arm, curiously enough, still hindering him from accompanying these young people. And so, as soon as the cream-coloured Captain and the phaeton had been brought round, off they went; with no thought of descending into the turmoil of the town and the river-side, but on the contrary making away for Bix, and Nettlebed, and Nuffield, by lonely highways, through still beechwoods, pausing at times, on some stretch of upland heath, to look abroad over the wide Berkshire plain, beyond which the far western hills were but as silver-gray films in the white glare of sun and sky. Then when they came to any steep incline they gave the reins to the diminutive groom; and descended, and went forward on foot, or lingered behind, as best pleased them; and being thus left free, and alone with themselves, in the silence of the summer morning, they could make experiments with new pet names for each other, and invent petulant misunderstandings for the sake of making up, and interchange confidences about the most trivial matters, which, so soon as they were known to be personal to either, immediately became of most momentous importance. The great humble-bees went drowsily booming by; the pink and white roses in the hedge were fragrant in the heat; a million diamonds sparkled on the glassy leaves of a holly-bush; a distant corn-field was scarlet with poppies up toward the rounded summit. The world was so full of beautiful things!—and their hearts were so full of happiness.

But still—

“Nan,” said he, “suppose there is something you know you ought to laugh at ; and suppose you allow it to trouble you ; and suppose you call yourself a fool for allowing it to trouble you ; very well : which you is it that calls the other you a fool—which is your real self ? ”

“If these were the problems, Sidney,” she said, “they put before you at All Souls’, I don’t wonder that you came away and settled down among your own books at Henley. But what is the trouble ? Won’t you tell it me ? ”

And he did tell her, in a measure, the story of his relationship with Lady Helen ; and he told her also something of what his mother had said the day before ; though he carefully avoided her phrase about his honour being at stake ; that was too serious, considering that he was making light of all this embroilment. And meanwhile Nan’s usually happy and sunny face had grown unwontedly thoughtful and preoccupied.

“Is she so very beautiful, Sidney ? ” she asked, in a low voice.

“Lady Helen ? Oh, she is good-looking enough—distinguished-looking, you know—and elegant and graceful, and all that. And clever too ; rather too sharp, indeed, when her temper is ruffled. But she can talk ; and she’s learned in all the new religions—or irreligions ; and she keeps abreast of all the latest scientific discoveries—at least she goes to soirées at South Kensington. Oh, yes, she is clever——”

“Is she so very handsome, Sidney ? ” she asked again.

“Well, she has a good figure ; and, as I say, she is graceful and elegant, and she dresses beautifully,” he replied, in a vague kind of way. Then of a sudden, as if by some inspiration or insight, he altered his tone, and said boldly : “But I will tell you this, Nan : if you and she were in the same room together, no one would look her way. Why, you don’t in the least seem to understand that there is a kind of splendour about you that is almost bewildering. And you don’t understand what wonderful eyes you have—

how they flash and wound—you don't know how they flashed and wounded a poor casual stranger who chanced to be going by the front of St. Mary's Church."

"And your mother expects you to marry her?" Nan asked again, in the same low voice.

"Blessed are they who expect nothing!" he answered—for he would not have her mind overclouded on this fair morning.

"And perhaps Lady Helen also?"

"How can I tell? That is not a question to be asked of a young lady, unless you are pretty sure of the answer. And if there did not seem to be some kind of madness in the air at present, I should have said it was about the last thing that could have got into Lady Helen's head. However, I should not have bothered you with all this nonsense: let us have done with it. And I am going to give my mother something else to think of; something more reasonable, and wholesomer, and pleasanter; I'm going to bring her out to see you, Nan, either to-morrow or next day."

She looked up, startled.

"Oh, do not be alarmed," he went on. "I shall say nothing of our engagement. I have all my dark scheme planned out; I mean to introduce her to your father and you by a kind of accident; and then she will form her first impressions of you without any sort of prejudice. Do you see? And you will find her a delightful woman—as soon as this absurdity has got cleared out of her head; the sort of woman to make friends with everybody—full of fun and good-humour and frank kindliness. She likes her own way a little, you know; but then she has been allowed that all her life; and I am sure that not only her own family, but also the families they have intermarried with, would tell you that never once had she shown a trace of selfishness. She likes regulating things and managing, no doubt; but it is never for herself. And my forecast is this, Nan: that in about two minutes after seeing you—in about one minute after seeing you—she will love you."

When after their long roundabout drive—which was chiefly a wandering about on foot through still woodland ways—they returned to Crowhurst, Sidney had to reluctantly say good-bye : he had promised his mother and Lady Helen to be in attendance at a certain hour. And when he had gone, Nan and her father went out into the garden, among the white campanulas, and the clustered roses, and the trained honeysuckle sweetening all the surrounding air. He thought she was rather silent, as they took their little walk together, arm-in-arm. He glanced at her once or twice, furtively and anxiously. And then he said—

“There has been no trouble, Nan? You seem rather quiet. There has been nothing to trouble you?”

“Oh, no,” she said, rousing herself to cheerfulness. “Nothing at all. I was only thinking. Sidney says he will bring Mrs. Hume out to see us to-morrow or next day.”

“Yes?” he said, in his grave and tranquil way. “Well, that is as it should be. And I hope Mrs. Hume and you will become very good friends.”

But by-and-by, as they were strolling up and down the paths, between the borders of dark blue lobelia, he said quite timidly—

“Nan, I have been considering. Perhaps you would rather that I was out of the way when Mrs. Hume calls?”

She turned and stared at him, not comprehending; or denying to herself that she did, or could, comprehend.

“It is you she is coming to see,” he explained, with the strangest humility. “She might not want to see me at all. And perhaps you would rather that I kept out of the way—I could go for a walk, you know, while she was here.”

She looked at him again.

“Yes, that is a likely thing!” she said—with proud and tremulous lips.

CHAPTER XV.

IN A LIBRARY, AND ELSEWHERE.

WHEN, on the following afternoon, Mrs. Hume was asked by her son to go for a little walk into the country, she was not so surprised as many mothers would have been in the circumstances ; for these two had always been great companions, when the boy was home from college ; their tall figures were a conspicuous and familiar feature in and about Henley. On this occasion he said they ought to get away from the tumult of the river-side ; they would have enough of that on the regatta days ; an hour or two amidst the quiet of the beechwoods, or out on the upland heaths, would be a pleasant change. And to this she blithely assented ; she was in a most happy and gracious humour ; for now she was quite convinced—since he had made no further protest, nor, indeed, reverted to the matter in any way—that her warning words had taken effect, and that he had resolved to acquit himself in regard to Lady Helen as honour seemed to demand. So all was well ; her heart was full of blissful content ; and it was in a most cheerful mood that she set out with him—these two looking like brother and sister, but for the silver-white hair—to leave this busy little town, by way of the long ascent of Gravel Hill.

And very briskly and brightly she talked and chatted to him, of many matters and many men and women ; and when she came, by accident as it were, to Lady Helen Yorke, she did not fear to mention her either. Yet, strangely enough, it was not in praise of her dearest Helen that she spoke, it was rather in disparagement.

“Spoiled ? Oh, yes—I’ve often said it. How could she help being spoiled ? A reigning beauty has to encounter that kind of thing, of course—paragraphs in the papers about her superb appearance at such and such a reception—photographs in the shop-windows—coloured lithographs in the supplements of women’s journals—all that is not

wholesome for a young girl. And then the way the men run after her ! I wonder how many offers of marriage she has refused ; and naturally that puts it into a young woman's head that she can throw the handkerchief whenever and wherever she pleases ; and she becomes more and more finical—and perhaps even contemptuous of the mankind around her. And yet," continued this skilful detractor, "she is docile in some cases ; she likes to learn ; she has been reading up lately all sorts of books about ancient Greece, since I gave her a hint as to what you were working at ; and only the other day she was wondering if you would tell her whether she ought to keep to the familiar *Mycenae*, or go half-way and say *Mykenae*, or go all the way and say *Mukenai*. And that is another thing : she is profoundly interested in excavations ; she would like to try some little private enterprise—Syracuse she was suggesting——"

"Alexandria would suit her turn better," said he—"the ancient Alexandria, that has lain buried for centuries ; but she would have to have a pretty large fortune, and the Egyptian government as well, at her back."

"Oh, she will be a very rich woman when her father dies !" Mrs. Hume said, seriously. "Or even when she marries, I suppose, he will do something handsome by her. And I was thinking myself," she continued, in a more off-hand way, "of some little joint undertaking. For example, if Helen were resolute about it, I shouldn't mind coming in with some fragment of my small savings—with your permission, of course, for all that, such as it is, is coming to you ; and out of your own capital you might be willing to subscribe something ; so that the three of us would have the whole project in our own hands. And don't suppose that I want to stand in front of the ruins to be photographed, and to appear in the frontispiece of the book ; not at all ; you two only ; I should be behind the camera, making tea. And what a useful book that would be for me—with your name, and Helen's, also, on the title-page—I mean useful as a wedding present : I declare my

poor wits are incapable of devising anything new, and my poor purse is drained. But a book with my son's name on the titlepage, that would be something—and—and if Helen's name were there also—that would be a happy conjunction, wouldn't it ?”

The prospect of being allowed to dig at Alexandria did not appear to excite his enthusiasm, the fact being that at this point his eyes were fixed on a certain white gate, and he had become the prey of an overpowering anxiety. For, as they drew near to Crowhurst, he found himself more and more perplexed as to inventing any rational and plausible excuse for calling there ; and he was vaguely thinking of continuing their walk, and postponing the awkward moment until their return. But as it chanced, as they came up to the gate, Mrs. Hume, looking over the bars, said—

“What a fine show of pansies !”

She paused, as there seemed to be no one about. The pansies were a broad border round a plot in the front lawn—pale yellow and snow-white they were, a goodly show. But the next plot had a border of another plant which was unfamiliar to her—a plant with dark-green lanceolate leaves, and spiky, tubular, orange-red flowers.

“I wonder what that is,” she said, incidentally.

“Let me go in and ask,” said he, in his desperate case. “I know the people very well—oh, yes—I have made their acquaintance—a Mr. Summers and his daughter who have come to live here—the fact is, I have been thinking that you ought to call as they are comparatively strangers——”

She seemed a little surprised ; but she was not particularly sensitive or backward ; besides she was ready to agree to anything after his tacit acquiescence in her great Eastern scheme—for at least he had brought no immediate objection.

“Oh, very well, if you like,” she said, at haphazard. “But I have brought no visiting-card with me.”

“They are sure to be at home—and they will give you a cup of tea,” he said,

So they opened the gate, went up to the house, rang the bell, entered, and were shown into the small drawing-room.

"Who are they, did you say?" she asked, as she took a seat.

"Mr. Summers—and his daughter," said he—with his ears trembling for footsteps.

It was Nan who first appeared, and now Mrs. Hume was nothing less than astonished: this was not at all the kind of country maiden she had expected to find in a road-side villa or transformed farm-house, but a young creature of quite distinctive and remarkable beauty, who had a quiet self-possession and a perfect manner as she bade her visitors welcome, and whose voice was extremely musical and pleasant, with no trace of rustic accent. Mrs. Hume was a shrewd and quick-thinking woman: why had Sidney never said a word to her before of this new acquaintance? Young men were given to talking of pretty girls; he could not be quite so indifferent to them—although he had generally shown himself indifferent—as to have forgotten even the existence of this exceptionally and even remarkably attractive young person? Mrs. Hume was a little alarmed and bewildered. The girl was very charming, very modest, and her voice was winning; but what was Sidney doing in this house? And why had he so carefully concealed his knowledge of these people?

Nan's father now entered the room; and instantly it struck Mrs. Hume that she had seen this peculiar-looking man—and no doubt his pretty daughter also—somewhere before, perhaps at a railway station. He came forward, and was introduced to her, and said a word or two; then he took a seat rather towards the window, as if he would leave Nan to continue the conversation, as if he wished to be ignored and forgotten. But that was not at all according to Nan's view of the situation. In answer to her visitor's friendly inquiries, she would say, "My father does not care to know many people," or "My father is quite content with this quiet life," and so forth; and she would appeal to him;

and drag him into the general talk, whether he wished it or no. Nevertheless, it was apparent that he would rather keep in the background; he looked out of the window mostly, or at the floor; he would have Nan, with her musical speech, and her pretty ways learnt at the vicarage, represent this small household. Mrs. Hume looked curiously from one to the other of those two.

Then after some little while spent mostly in conversation between the elderly lady and the young girl, Mr. Summers said (quite humbly—yet anxious to help Nan a little)—

“Nan, shall I ring for some tea?”

But with that Mrs. Hume rose.

“Oh, no, please don’t,” she said, with a fine frankness and good-humour. “Let me apologise for our intrusion. The fact is, I saw a plant in your front-garden I did not know the name of; and my son said he had made your acquaintance; and so we took the liberty of coming in.”

For a second there was an awkward pause. Nan did not know what to say next. It was her father who came to her rescue.

“We shall be glad to see you at any time,” he said, in his grave, submissive fashion.

“Oh, thank you—thank you. Good-bye—good-bye!” said this tall, silver-haired lady in her most gracious way; and then mother and son went along the passage: Mr. Summers attentively opened the door for them; and Nan stood on the threshold, to have a parting glimpse of her lover. Not any one of the four had remembered aught of the nameless plant that had been made the excuse for this singular interview.

But as they moved away from the house, Mrs. Hume’s mind was filled with a dim and dark suspicion that she had been led into a trap; and, the moment that Sidney spoke, she became certain of it.

“Well, Mater, what do you think of her?” said he, concealing his anxiety.

And she also was capable of concealment. It was the very question she had anticipated; but she was far too astute to reveal the sharp apprehension it caused her.

"Oh, she is a pretty little thing," she answered, with assumed carelessness.

'A pretty little thing?' He could scarcely believe his ears. Was this all the impression that had been produced by his incomparable Nan? Does one look on the moonlight shining on the sea of a summer night, and say indifferently, 'Oh, yes, well enough!'

"Little?" he remonstrated. "I don't see how you can call her little. She doesn't belong to the sons and daughters of Anak, as our family do; but she is not little. I should think most people would consider her rather tall—because of her slim and graceful figure. But that is hardly the question. It is hardly a question of height. Was there nothing else that struck you?—the simplicity and charm of her manner?—the unusual, you might almost say the extraordinary beauty of her eyes? You ought to know what a good manner is. If it comes to that, you ought to know what beautiful eyes are. And yet you only say, 'Oh, a pretty little thing!'"

His acute disappointment was but too manifest; nor did his insidious flattery in any way mitigate the nameless fears that now beset her.

"It is not a matter of much concern, is it?" she said, with admirable composure, as they walked along. "But who are they? Why have you not spoken of them before? I fancy I have seen the man—the father—somewhere. Who is he? What is he? What does he do?"

"He doesn't do anything," he replied, in profound chagrin. Had Nan's beauty and her musical speech so entirely failed to conquer? And if so, why was it so? He did not remember, at this perturbed and unsettling moment, that the shining eyes of one woman shine upon another woman in vain.

"But what has he been, then?" said Mrs. Hume,

"A trainer of race-horses, I believe," he replied, curtly : he did not care what he answered, now that she had not succumbed to Nan at the very first glance.

"Really, Sidney," the other said, "you seem to be a little complaisant in forming your acquaintance. A trainer of race-horses——"

"I can assure you, my dear mother," said he, "that in the opinion of a great number of people in this country a trainer of race-horses is a very important person ; and there is no reason whatever why he should not be a perfectly honest and upright man. But what has that got to do with me ? Mr. Summers is no longer a trainer of race-horses. I judge of him as he is. I see his admirable conduct with regard to his daughter—his extraordinary affection for her—his constant care of her—his sacrifice of himself whenever he thinks he can add one jot to her happiness. And to tell you the truth, mother, I thought you would have been a little more impressed by—Miss Summers. You don't see her like every day, either in appearance, or manner, or disposition. And yet you find nothing to say but 'a pretty little thing'!"

"I do not understand your disappointment," Mrs. Hume observed, with a certain coldness. "I might, perhaps, if I understood the origin of your interest in this girl, who, you must remember, is entirely a stranger to me." And thereafter for a time they walked on in silence, doubtless with many thoughts.

That night at dinner she said to him, in an unconcerned kind of fashion—

"How did you come to know those people, Sidney ?" And the phrase 'those people' sounded to him cruel : it seemed not only to hold Nan at arm's length but to banish her a hundred miles away.

"Merely by accident," he responded, without heart. For he had magnified his mother's indifference, or her vague suspicion into antagonism ; and it seemed hopeless to try to overcome it. Where Nan, in all the glamour of her

youthful beauty, and with the soft charm of her speech, had failed, how was he to succeed? Nevertheless he would make one more effort. "Really, mother," he said, "I cannot understand why you should be so blind. It is not a question of prejudice or prepossession; it is a question of obvious fact. Any stranger, whoever he or she might be, taken out to Crowhurst, must see plainly enough that the girl is of quite unusual beauty and fascination. Other qualities, of mind and disposition, you might get to know afterwards—and I think they would repay the trouble—but what I say is that a mere outsider must admit that she has a most graceful figure, and refined features, and quite wonderful eyes. A passer-by in the street could not fail to notice them. And I should have thought that one of the 'beautiful Miss Hays' would have been the very first to recognise them."

"I have said nothing against the girl's appearance," observed his mother, distantly.

"Then what else can you say against her?" he demanded, with imprudent haste. "Why should you be so prejudiced against her? What little you saw of her—her mere external beauty—would extort admiration from any stranger in the street; and why should you assume that in her disposition, her character, her training, or what not, there is something that does not correspond—some defect that you cannot name——"

"Really, Sidney, your language is most extraordinary!" she protested. "When have I said anything at all against the girl?"

"Then why should you be prejudiced against her?" he went on, with some distressing consciousness that he was only beating the air. "It isn't what you say—it is what you don't say. You meet a quite rare and remarkable creature, and you talk with her and have every opportunity of judging her, and she shows you every kindness she can, in her modest and gentle fashion; and so far from being impressed, you come away saying

some slighting thing about her. What is that if not prejudice?—the most incomprehensible prejudice!”

“I did not know you were looking forward to my being impressed,” she made answer, calmly. “And I am not aware of having given way to any prejudice. Why should I be prejudiced? I don’t understand you at all, Sidney; or why should you be concerned about my opinion of—of—what was the young lady’s name?” And with that she changed the subject; but the note of keen mortification that had rung through this plaint of his, remained in her mind, and in no wise tended to lessen her secret alarm.

Nevertheless the next day, which was the first of the regatta-days, brought her some reassurance. Both mother and son were the guests of Lady Helen, for the lawn at Monks-Hatton Hall afforded an excellent view of the course; and amid the coming and going of many visitors, between the races, Lady Helen chose to make it apparent that Mrs. Hume and Sidney were her very particular friends; while he on his part was humbly and obediently attentive to his fair young hostess, and that to an unwonted degree. The truth is, in his present difficult, and even bewildering, position, he was anxious to find out what was really expected of him. Had she, also, adopted the preposterous misapprehension that had got into his mother’s head? And if not—for it seemed hardly credible—would she not become his ally? What better court of appeal could there be, if his honour was impugned? So he sought to establish very amicable relations with Lady Helen; and she in turn was pleased to receive these little advances with gracious favour.

“Sidney,” she said to him, in the early part of the afternoon, “don’t you think it very hard that poor mamma should be shut up and have no part in all this gaiety beyond looking out from a window? Don’t you think we might go and pay her a little visit? We should never be missed by these people. Besides, Mrs. Hume knows every one who is here, or who is likely to come.” For indeed there were a good many guests and visitors in possession of this quiet

retreat, strolling about the lawn, or under the umbrageous limes and sycamores and purple beeches, or seated beneath the vast Japanese umbrellas—the scarlet and black of which blazed in the sunlight amid so much soft green—or wandering into the cool marquee, where there was a convenient *buffet*, with all kinds of beverages and cakes and fruit.

“Oh, yes, certainly,” said he, with prompt obedience, and not stopping to consider that his being singled out in this way might seem rather invidious and significant.

They left the lawn, went up the gray steps, passed in under the sunblinds and through the library, and ascended the wide staircase, Sidney being at length ushered into the room where the invalid, or hypochondriac, was seated at the window, looking out on the hushed swarming of the river. The little pale old lady, sighing much, appeared none the less pleased to be thus remembered. She even hinted that Sidney might remain with her for a time, while her daughter returned to her guests. Lady Helen, however, would not hear of that.

“No, no, we shall be discovered. Sidney and I are playing truant, and we must not stay too long, or we shall be caught. Good-bye, mamma, dear ; I hope Mrs. Spink is looking well after you.” But if she was in a hurry to leave the invalid’s room, she was in no such hurry to pass through the library below. And indeed it was a seductive place to linger in ; for those fascinating shelves of beautiful bindings, and the tall scagliola columns, and the decorated frieze and ceiling, and the cases of miniatures, and the statuettes and busts were all in a cool shadow, grateful enough as contrasted with the glare outside.

“I wish,” she said, as she saw his eyes involuntarily attracted by that array of books—“I wish, Sidney, you would come over here some day, when you have two or three hours to spare, and you could tell me something about the treasures in this library. For there are treasures, I know that, though my father does not care about such

things. It was my grandfather who mainly built up the collection. There are some good Caxtons, for example ; but I want to be told more particularly about them. And first editions, too. Here is the '23 folio—the Shakespeare folio ; would you consider this a tall copy ? ”

She moved towards the shelves, and of course he followed.

“ Take it out for me, please,” she said.

He did as he was bid. He took out the precious volume, and placed it on a table ; and while he was examining the introductory pages—the Ben Jonson sonnet, the Droeshout portrait, and so forth—she was standing very close to him, her head also bent down. Her dress of cream-white serge, with its thick bands of gold cord, had some furry white stuff round the throat. Was it from that soft and downy collar there came a breath of perfume that was plainly perceptible ? And she would also turn over the leaves, so that her fingers touched his occasionally by fortuitous accident. Did he know, she asked, of some extraordinary repetitions in the text that the worthy Heminge and Condell had overlooked ? And was it not a shame that even the parting between Romeo and Juliet should have been hashed about ? ‘ Sleep dwell upon thine eyes, peace in thy breast : would I were sleep and peace so sweet to rest ! ’—clearly that was Romeo’s speech. She repeated the lines very prettily, in a gentle undertone. And in reply he said that, as far as he knew about such things, this seemed a very perfect copy—a treasure indeed.

When he had put the folio back, she took him to the cases of miniatures that were set on tall stands. And here also she held him enchained over those portraits of admirals and generals, of ladies in short-waisted dresses and shining curls, of young squires in high coat collars, of fair young girls with ivory complexion and puffed sleeves. But although he and she were again standing so close together that the cream-white serge just touched his arm, there was

for him no shiver and thrill of magnetism in that contiguity : he merely asked her if she had ever read of the elaborate little tricks and dodges with which the miniature-painters lent brightness to the eyes of their models and gave brilliancy to their hair. She lingered over these cases ; they seemed to interest her ; and he was bound to profess a like interest. A distant sound of cheering came from along the crowded banks ; but apparently she had forgotten all about the regatta and her visitors and guests. This spacious apartment was secluded and quiet and gratefully cool ; and there were many other things to claim attention—some admirable bronzes, for example. And if he had relapsed into the formal ‘Lady Helen,’ she, at least, remained true to their compact, and called him ‘Sidney’ in soft tones.

The door was opened : Mrs. Spink appeared—caught sight of these two—looked alarmed—exclaimed “Oh, I beg your pardon !” and at once withdrew again.

“That woman,” said Lady Helen, vindictively, “is just made of eyes—she is all eyes. Fortunately she was born without a tongue. She takes in everything she sees, and says nothing.”

“But don’t you think we should go back to the lawn ?” he suggested. “Your friends will miss you.”

“Yes, of course—yes, I suppose so,” she said ; and no doubt the petulant air she wore as she walked to the open window owed its origin to Mrs. Spink’s untoward intrusion. “I dare say it is one’s duty to go and look at a lot of school-boys splashing the water !”

She preceded him down the wide grey steps ; and presently she had rejoined her friends, in capital spirits apparently, going from one little group to another, and making herself the life and soul of each as she did so. For she could be very entertaining, and merry, and humorous when she chose ; and, truth to say, no one seemed to pay much heed to the racing on the river ; this broad lawn might have been a London drawing-room so far as the

occupations of the people were concerned. She played the part of hostess excellently well—moving hither and thither with swift, amusing speech and gracious looks. But she appeared to have no further word for Sidney Hume.

When mother and son returned to Lilac Lodge, the former was in the happiest of moods; for she was convinced that all was going satisfactorily again, and that she could dismiss those dim disquietudes that had arisen in her mind.

“My dear Sid,” she remarked, gaily, as they sat at dinner, “are you aware that Helen and you were absent for quite an unconscionable time this afternoon—and absent together—conspicuously absent, as one might say? Not that I object, not at all; but the fact is that Helen, though the very dearest creature in the world, is apt to be the least bit wilful and headstrong; and it should be for you to teach her a little discretion, especially on a public occasion of this kind. Oh, yes—I saw you—I saw you cross the lawn together—I saw you disappear into the library——”

“Mother, when will you have done with this nonsense?” he said—and there was something in his tone that caused her face to grow grave—something she seemed to dread: her raillery vanished. “I tell you there is nothing between Lady Helen and me,” he continued, explicitly. “If ever I marry, there is for me but the one woman in the world; and you saw her yesterday, at Crowhurst. She, too, knows that; and we are both content to wait, to see what circumstances may arise. I had hoped you would have taken more kindly to her—I had indeed hoped for that; but perhaps you may, when you get to know her better.”

She listened, staring at him, and for the moment struck into utter and abject silence. Her worst fears, that she had again and again striven to thrust aside, were now confirmed. And to her this thing that loomed ahead was nothing less than an appalling tragedy—the death-blow to

her most cherished schemes—her life, successful all the way through, finding its climax in failure and dismay. But Sidney was not married yet; there was that one straw she could cling to.

CHAPTER XVI.

A CHALLENGE.

NAN was in her garden—among the white Canterbury bells, the glowing scarlet geraniums, the pansies, the pinks, the musk, the variegated sweet-williams; bees were humming and butterflies fluttering in the brilliant sunshine; the honeysuckle clusters, now fully out, and the abundant roses sent abroad their fragrance through all the warm wavering air. Her father was with her. It was of Mrs. Hume's visit they were talking.

"And I must keep repeating this to you, Nan," said he, "for your guidance in after days. I hope they will treat you well; but if they should be resentful—if they should say anything—then you have your answer. If they say, 'Your father was so-and-so or so-and-so; and it was presumption on your part to come into our family,' you can say, 'Yes, it is true my father was so-and-so or so-and-so; but people cannot always be what they would like to be. People are not all born rich, and able to choose for themselves what lives they will lead. Circumstances have a hard grip on the poor and ill-educated——'"

"If you think I am going to make any apology for you, Dodo," she said, in hot indignation, "then you are quite entirely mistaken. An apology? Yes, indeed!"

"But above all," he went on, gently, "your chief answer must be that you did not ask to enter their family. It was none of your seeking. And it was none of mine—no, indeed, it was none of mine. I would rather . . . But when I saw you were inclined towards him—when you told me your story—then that was enough: then there was nothing for

it but to look forward and hope for the best. The best?—why of course. It will be all right, Nan,” he continued, with much cheerfulness. “Remember, you will have a young husband to take your part—a young fellow who has plenty of independence and pluck—I can see that well : he won’t leave you unprotected—he will be there to stand by you——”

“I wish you would not talk like that, Dodo,” said she, in a low voice.

“Are we children?” he demanded, “that we are afraid to face what lies before us? Once let me see you happily settled—comfortably and happily settled—and then whatever comes to me, next week, next year, any year, won’t be of very much consequence, I think!”

And when Sidney came out, as he had promised to do, Nan’s father was still in the same resolutely optimistic mood.

“I wish,” said he, “you would take this girl and make her drive you down to Henley bridge, and give her a look at the river. She lives far too humdrum a life up here—among a lot of flowers——”

“And Henley Regatta,” said Sidney, promptly falling in with the suggestion, “is one of the most beautiful things in England. Very seldom they get a morning like this for it.”

“But won’t you come with us, Dodo?” said she, regarding him.

“No, no,” he made answer, impatiently. “The driving would jolt my arm. Now go away and get ready; and I’ll tell them about the phaeton.”

And thus it was that, a little while thereafter, Nan and Sidney had left the solitude of the beechwoods, and were driving into Henley, upon which, on this auspicious morning, all kinds of vehicles were seen to be converging. But it was not of the boat-races they were thinking; it was of something far more important; nothing less than—a Book!

“For I must keep myself out of the general reproach,”

he said, blithely enough. "Every other Oxford Fellow you meet has some great object in his mind—and it never comes to anything. But now that I have my materials in a kind of arrangement—now that I begin to see my way—I must actually set to work. And then the Mater will be satisfied at last : my name on a title-page—that has always been one of her secret ambitions. It may be a good book or a bad book ; but at least it can be elegantly bound, and presented to friends. And I shouldn't wonder if the publisher made a little profit : we are a large family."

He laughed.

"A book is all right. Yes, she will permit of that, and even approve ; but she won't go further—she won't descend lower. She has heard that I know a number of writing-men—men who write for the reviews and the newspapers ; and I fancy she is haunted by a horrible misgiving that sooner or later I may lapse into journalism. Journalism—for any one connected with the august Humes and Hays—it would be too sacrilegious."

"But I should like to have you write for the newspapers and the reviews, Sidney," said she, in her bold way. "I should like your name to be known to the public. And think what a public the English-reading public is—Australia, Canada, America—a public to think of !"

"I am afraid you are not a person of lofty mind, Nan," said he. "Besides it's an awful shame of amateurs to step in and take the bread out of the mouth of the professionals—the people who have to earn their living by journalism. It's difficult enough for them, I suppose, at the best. Why, I heard the other day of a poor wretch who was in such straits to get a taking topic that he set to and concocted a sham advertisement, paid five shillings for its insertion in an evening journal, then he took it as the text of an article—on the unblushing luxury of the fashionable classes, I think it was—and carried both article and advertisement to his Editor, the advertisement being shown as a proof that here was something that urgently wanted writing about.

Poor chap!—even if he got two guineas for the article, five shillings is a long percentage to pay——”

He did not conclude the sentence : he suddenly found Mrs. Spink's eyes fixed on him. She was walking along the highway—it was a portion of the Fair Mile they had arrived at—and she was alone but for a gaunt and shaggy deer-hound that was trotting after her. The next instant her eyes were turned upon Nan—swiftly and covertly. With some kind of involuntary impulse, Sidney raised his hat ; but she took no notice ; she was now gazing blankly along the great avenue.

“Haughty person,” he remarked, without much concern.

“Who is she ?” Nan inquired.

“She is what they call a reduced gentlewoman who acts as companion to Lady Monks-Hatton. And when she and Lady Helen called on me at All Souls', I did my little best for them ; I gave them what my poor rooms could afford ; she need not be so arrogant.”

“Oh, Lady Helen called on you at All Souls' ?” said Nan, somewhat coldly.

“I met them in the High, by accident,” he explained ; “and I gave them lunch ; I did what I could ; she need not be so forgetful. I detest pride. And I also detest impertinence : she had a good stare at you, Nan.”

“Yes, indeed,” said Nan, with conscious colour in her face. She knew quite well what suspicions might be aroused by the fact of her conspicuously driving this young man about.

Nor was this the only acquaintance they were destined to encounter. As they were passing down Hart Street on their way to the crowded bridge, who should cross just ahead of them but Dick Erridge ? He was in an open fly ; apparently he had come from the station, and was on his way to the Red Lion. Dick, regarding these two with evident surprise, had nevertheless sufficient presence of mind to salute the young lady ; she bowed to him in return ; and then the two carriages went their divergent ways, the

phaeton making slow progress through the scattered groups.

But Nan had become more and more embarrassed.

"Sidney," she said, in an undertone, "I should like to get away from all these people—I do not know how many more may recognise us. What do you say—shall we cross the bridge, and get away up into the lonely country?—I know the quieter byways. I'm not used to a crowd; and I don't like the people staring."

"By all means," said he at once; surely to be alone with Nan in the silent woodland ways was more to him than all this hubbub of cheering and waving of hats and handkerchiefs. Of course as they crossed the bridge they caught a glimpse of the brilliant spectacle; the flags, and striped awnings, and scarlet parasols; the great mass of rowing-boats and punts lining each side of the stream; and out in the middle two small white dots coming along—the competitors in a sculling match—while the umpire's steam-launch accompanied the rival craft. It was no hardship for them to turn from that many-coloured, wide-murmuring scene. They drove on, by the Hurley and Maidenhead highway, until they reached the foot of a long ascent; then they surrendered the phaeton to the tiny groom; and presently they were making upward for the solitary heights—leaving the valley gradually below them, until the red roofs of the town, and even the four little turrets on the top of St. Mary's tower, had entirely disappeared; while placidly and happily they went wandering forward into a wide and silent country, with strips of green cornland here and there, that stretched away to a serrated horizon-line of wooded hill, faintly and filmily blue against the distant sky.

Meantime Dick Erridge had arrived at the door of the Red Lion. But he did not get down from the cab. He handed out his light travelling-bag; said he assumed that the house was full; asked if they would kindly try to get him a room in the town; and then he told the driver to drive out to Crowhurst. There was a blind and blank look

in his face—all the jauntiness gone from him—the straw hat with its band of smart ribbon seemed out of keeping with his air of sombre concern.

When he arrived at Crowhurst, he found Mr. Summers at the gate, which he was in the act of opening.

“Well, well,” said Nan’s father, in a most friendly way, “who would have expected you of all people to turn your back on Henley Regatta?”

The young man paid and dismissed the cabman. Then he entered by the gate.

“You’re not looking well, old chap,” said Mr. Summers, regarding him. “Come in and have a nip of brandy.”

“Well, I will,” Dick made answer; and he followed his host into the house, and into the dining-room, and stood by while the cellaret was being opened. “Travelling all night, don’t you know—couldn’t get away till the last minute—my grandfather is a nailer when he wants people to dance attendance on him.”

The brandy seemed to revive him somewhat.

“I’ll tell you in one second how I came to turn my back on Henley,” he proceeded. “I was driving from the station to the Red Lion. I saw something—that rather made me jump. And if you say that I’m mistaken, well then, the Regatta may go hang; and if you say I am not mistaken, then Henley Regatta is no place for me. Only I seemed to want to know just at once; and so I made the cabman drive right on. And what I saw was this: I saw Miss Nan driving; and her companion was that young fellow Hume—Sidney Hume. Of course there may be nothing in it——”

“There’s something in it, Dick,” said Nan’s father, quietly—perhaps rather pityingly.

“Oh, there is, is there?” the young man repeated. “There is something in it, then? They have made it up in my absence?” He paused for a moment, perhaps the better to conceal his mortification. “Rather rough, I call it. I think you will admit yourself that it is *rather* rough.”

"Well, to tell you the truth, Dick," Mr. Summers said, "it all came about in an unexpected kind of way. And I am sure there was nothing underhand; I am certain there was no thought of doing anything unfair to you. You must remember that neither of them could have known you had any views—I don't suppose you said anything to Nan—and then again you didn't put in much of an appearance, now did you?—"

"There it is—that's where it is!" exclaimed the young man bitterly. "That's the result of being kept buried in a hole of a sea-side village, all because my grandfather keeps groaning with lumbago. Can I cure lumbago? Do I look like a cure for lumbago?"

He took a turn or two up and down, and even went to the window to conceal his profound chagrin. Then he came back.

"Well, I've got to show I'm not a bounder," he said. "I mean to show those two I know what's what. I'm not going to make a fuss, like one of those Johnnies on the stage, made up with white faces and black eyebrows, and slouching round street-corners with a dagger in their hand. I'm not built that way. Still—still I think it a *little* rough."

He suddenly fixed his regard on two instruments that Mr. Summers had been carrying when he was met at the gate; one was a pair of powerful steel pincers, the other was an iron hook.

"Where were you going when I came along?" he asked; clearly he had no mind to return to the river.

"Well," said Summers, "there is a farmer some little way from here who has gone and put barbed wire all through his hedges—by the public road—and the hedges are tall, so that you don't notice the wire—and in fact, the day before yesterday, Nan was reaching at some wild roses, and she stumbled a bit, and scratched all her wrist. It's a monstrous shame, I think—barbed wire is illegal—or ought to be——"

"Why, you could summons the infernal beast!" cried

Dick, his pent-up vexation finding vent at last, on a specific object. "Or, I'll tell you what's better, now : you and I will start off this very minute ; and we'll go to the farmer ; and you'll talk to him fair and square and moderate ; and then he'll give you some cheek ; and then you just hit him a clip on the side of the head that'll make him think he is a dear sweet baby-child again, with the mother o' Moses stretching him on her knees. That's just what we'll do now. You think your one arm isn't enough to knock the sawdust out of any Turnip-Johnny in the country ? If it comes to that, I'd rather like to have a try in myself. I'm not a big 'un ; but I can pound a bolster ; we'll see—we'll see. Come along ; I think we can make old Sheep-dip sit up !"

"No, no," said Mr. Summers, with a laugh at the young man's ferocity. "Peaceable ways are best, Dick. If you like to go along with me, I'll keep snip-snipping with the pincers, and you can take the hook and haul the wire through the hedge, and heave it away, or hide it in a ditch. It's quite a favourite neighbourhood of Nan's ; she likes to loiter about searching the hedges for plants and things. And of course a man would think nothing of a scratch ; but it's different with a girl's wrist—Nan tried to hide it with her glove—but I found it out——"

"I think," said Erridge, with grim significance, "that if old Thorley's-food-for-cattle were to happen to come along while we are destroying his fence, there might be a little difference of opinion : yes, just a little friendly difference of opinion. And I wonder what he'd be like when we had done with him !" But as they moved away from the house, his own private sorrows resumed their sway.

"Not that I have anything to complain of," he said, with a magnanimity that might have been absent from greater minds. "Perhaps I was a little backward in coming forward ; but that was my own lookout ; I wanted to give public notice and have everything aboveboard. Then the lumbago, that confounded lumbago : hard luck I call it : for what use was I ? I'm not a hospital nurse, with a bib

and tucker, and a pair of scissors dangling by her side. Of course I had my reasons : the old gentleman is going to leave me a little bit—so he kept telling me, anyway, when he wasn't howling and growling and groaning like a hedgehog on a hot girdle. No ; I don't suppose I've anything to complain of ; but all the same, when you get a thing sprung on you like this, when you have been looking forward to domestic felicity, and a smart dinner-table, and doing your friends well when they come to see you ; and then all of a sudden you're brought up, as if you'd burst your head against a flint wall—another fellow driving with her, don't you know : well, I call it a little bit rough—I call it just a little bit rough."

"Ah, well, my good chap," said Mr. Summers, with his grave eyes grown pensive, "there are many disappointments in life—but you are young——"

"Oh, look here," said Dick Erridge, interrupting without scruple, "I'm not going to have that consolation. I know what they say ; there's as good fish in the sea as ever were caught. That's all blossoming tomfoolery ; find me her match anywhere betwixt here and the Land's End, and then I'll believe those Solomon-Ecclesiasticus idiots. And suppose it was true ; suppose there's as good fish in the sea as ever was caught ; how are you going to catch 'em ? I had my chance—well, I ought to say that perhaps I had my chance, and missed it, like a blamed jackass. But I don't bear malice. I'll show them I'm not a bounder——"

"You're a right good fellow, Dick," said Mr. Summers. "And sometimes I have thought—But then, you see, Nan is peculiar—she has been peculiarly situated ; she has been brought up in a different kind of way. And I hope it will be all right. I think you can fairly believe it was no ambition of mine, her going among those people. No ; nor of hers, either. But here in a kind of chance way this young fellow comes along—handsome enough to dazzle any girl's eyes—and a fine young fellow besides—yes, I will say that—modest and manly and honest, if ever I met any

human being that was so ; and by a sort of accident, as it were, all this happens ; and the main thing—the very fortunate thing that I can see about it is that Nan looks happy. And I suppose I should be satisfied too. You see, Dick, I have been a little bit anxious now and again, in case anything should happen to me——”

“I like that !” the younger man broke in, scornfully—
“I like that ! About the strongest man in the length and breadth of this country talking like that ! But listen to what I’m going to say now, and this is my last word. If anything should happen—and nothing is going to happen—but what I want to say is this : that the daughter of Jim Summers, whether she’s married or whether she’s single, will never want for a true friend as long as this humble person has the breath of life left in him.”

“I can believe that,” Mr. Summers said, slowly, and in an undertone. “I know you, Dick.”

And while these two now proceeded to snip the scoundrelly wire, and haul it out, and heave it away, so that Nan’s pretty wrists should not again be scratched, Nan herself and her lover were away in the solitudes beyond and above the Thames—by Culham and Cockpoll Green and Crazy Hill—wandering along the lonely lanes, watching the cloud-shadows steal over the blue-green wheat, or some recently harrowed field flare red in the sun ; while ever and always they had the same old story, magic and wonderful, to repeat to each other a thousand times in the course of an hour. The cream-coloured black-maned Captain had an easy time of it ; the phaeton was a light one, and the groom a mere feather-weight ; and now, when they were in out-of-the-way neighbourhoods, they had almost given up the pretence of driving. The circus-looking animal, as Mr. Summers had unfairly called that most excellent creature, was allowed to walk both heights and hollows and even level plains. For Sidney and she had a marvellous number of things to talk of—the passionate hopes and aspirations of youth, doubts to be resolved away, courage to be sum-

moned up, and still again the old assurances to be given. Not that Nan was over-timid and apprehensive. She was naturally of a gay disposition, well pleased with the passing hour, especially when the sun was shining, and the winds were soft, and there were wild-roses along the highway. But on one point she could not attain to her lover's confidence.

"No, no, Sidney," said she, laughing and shaking her head; "you can make me believe a good deal, but not that. I know what your mother thinks of me, and what she is likely to think. I am a dangerous person. All the time she was in the room at Crowhurst she was examining me; I felt her eyes upon me——"

"Yes, naturally, as a stranger!" he exclaimed.

"No, no; more than that," said Nan. "She suspected—and she suspects me now."

"There, I can convince you you are wrong," he rejoined. "There is no more suspicion in the matter. Last night I informed her, in set terms, that I meant to marry you or no one."

She looked up quickly. "Why did you not tell me that before?"

"Well," said he, with a trifle of embarrassment, "I was waiting until the Mater and I had had some further talk, so that I could bring you a message from her."

"So you have told her?" said Nan, thoughtfully. "Then I am no longer merely suspected. Now I am her enemy."

"Oh, stuff and nonsense!" he cried. "Do you think she sets such store by her futile schemes? Do you think she cannot recognise the impossible as well as any one else? There is no question of compulsion. She knows I am my own master; and if the worst came to the worst——"

At this moment they happened to be passing an odd little wayside public-house, and a sudden thought struck his fancy.

"Shall we stop and have a bit of lunch, Nan?" said he.

"Very well," she answered, for it was mid-day, and they had walked many miles.

So they sate down on the outside bench ; the phaeton, coming up, was brought to a standstill, and a shock-headed boy despatched for a pail of water for the horse ; and by-and-by an old woman brought the two travellers some bread, and a piece of cheese, and a couple of bottles of ginger-beer, all of which they consumed with the greatest apparent satisfaction.

"It is good to practise economy," said he, with some dark amusement in his eyes, "in view of contingencies."

"I wish for no better fare," said Nan ; she was a contented kind of a lass.

But while they were thus divinely idle and unconcerned, Mrs. Hume had been neither the one nor the other. Swiftly and discreetly she had been pursuing her inquiries ; she had no longer a thought for the busy river and her many friends there ; even her dearest Helen, at the lawn at Monks-Hatton Hall, had to be neglected—so terrible was this danger that threatened. And as it chanced, her desperate efforts were rewarded in a way she could not have anticipated ; she could hardly believe in her astonishing good fortune ; now she could assure herself that her precious son—her Benjamin—the last of all her brilliant family—was to be saved from destruction.

Yet she was outwardly calm when she next encountered him—which was on his return home in the afternoon.

"What ?" he said. "I thought you would be over at the Hall."

"No," she made answer, quietly. "I wished to have the earliest opportunity of conveying to you a little piece of news I have received to-day. It is about some friends of yours. You remember what you told me last night. I said nothing, for it is not a thing to be argued about ; but I felt certain you had fallen into rather incomprehensible company ; and so I have been making inquiries. My dear boy, you have been misinformed. Mr. Summers is not an

ex-trainer of race-horses—though that would have been bad enough, if you had been so infatuated as to think of associating any one connected with him with our family. No; Mr. Summers is not an ex-trainer; but he is an ex-champion—a pugilist—a common prize-fighter——”

“It is ridiculous rubbish!” he exclaimed, indignantly. “Do you suppose a pugilist would have enough money to educate his daughter in that way—to live in that way——”

“Nevertheless it is true,” she replied in a tranquil manner. “I can give you my authorities. Why, he is well known in the town—familiarily spoken of—though he lives apart there as a sort of outcast, with hardly any one to visit him but a kind of creature who keeps a public-house in Richmond. And these are the acquaintances you appear to have made! At all events, if you will think for a moment of the family—or rather, the families—to which you belong, I imagine you will pause a little before asking them to receive the daughter of a common prize-fighter. That would be something too much of outrageous folly!”

She left him, the better to let the blow strike home. And he stood stunned and bewildered; for despite his angry denial—first of all to her, and now to himself—there were some strange coincidences that came surging into his memory, assuming a greater and more startling importance the longer he thought of them.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE PUGILIST'S DAUGHTER.

LIKE to the slow-pulsating throb of the screw of a great steamer at sea, all through the long hours of the night certain words and phrases kept repeating themselves in his brain in a dull mechanical way: things not wholly unconnected either—the designations of the officers who presided over the ancient gymnasia—the names of the different contests and the conditions attached—lines and passages

from his favourite Greek authors in laudation of physical prowess and feats of strength and skill, and the like : accompanied by visions, too—now of the godlike man, Euryalos son of King Mekisteus, about to enter the boxing-ring ; now of the heaven-born Polydeuces overthrowing the giant-champion of the Bebryces ; again of Simaetha confiding to the Lady Moon the story of her tragic love—of her meeting with Delphis and Eudamippus on their return from ‘the glorious wrestler’s toil’—‘their breasts were brighter of sheen than thyself, Selene !’ For ere he went to sleep this young Fellow of All Souls’ had been valiantly striving to convince himself that a profession and an exercise that his beloved folk of the great days held in high honour might very well be tolerated in these later times ; and he was resolving that if this statement about Mr. Summers were true—and several surprising coincidences seemed to point to its truth—he would make no apology, he would take no shame to himself for the alliance he had formed. All this was very fine and heroic ; it was at any rate some little thing he could do for Nan’s sake ; and he went to bed comforted.

But when he awoke to the cold light of the new day, matters began to assume a very different, and a very grave aspect. How, for example, was he to introduce an expugilist to all those proud Hays and Humes and their families, or even to some college friend whom he might accidentally meet in town ? He had never considered the necessity of introducing Mr. Summers to anybody. Nan’s father had so persistently effaced himself and kept himself in the background—placing her forward as the only person to be considered—that Sidney had unconsciously fallen in with this arrangement, as he would have fallen in with any arrangement that secured to him Nan herself, with her musical undertones and her deep-wounding eyes. Nevertheless and undoubtedly marriage would bring him this father-in-law, whatever kind of man he was or might have been ; and the odium with which the prize-ring is now

regarded in England was not to be got over by appeals to the customs of the ancient Greeks. Then Lady Helen—and here his face flushed with vexation—would not Lady Helen smile her placid, inscrutable, patronising smile when she heard that he had married a pugilist's daughter?

And again his mind revolted from this possibility : it was a false and preposterous accusation, and nothing more. Were prize-fighters in the habit of earning sums sufficient to enable them to retire to such a place as Crowhurst, and live there, if not in luxury, at least in easy contentment? It is true that quite recently, in England, America, and Australia, an attempt had been made to galvanise a moribund institution ; and matches had been made for large stakes ; but the winners of these fights, few in number, were quite well known, and Mr. Summers was not one of them. Had Nan's father—Sidney asked himself, in this rapid survey of a critical situation—the manners or the appearance of a pugilist? Was not the typical pugilist a low-browed, broken-nosed, crop-haired person, wearing sham diamond rings and wide-checked trousers, a frequenter of public-houses and mean gambling-hells, occasionally the buffoon and attendant of some microcephalous peer? And had not Dick Erridge distinctly stated that Mr. Summers had been a trainer of race-horses, which was in a rough-and-ready way a sufficiently respectable calling? Dick Erridge ought to know ; he appeared to have been acquainted with Nan's father for years. Doubtless there were disquieting circumstances. There was the prompt and skilful manner in which Mr. Summers had bowled over the two navvies in the Oxford Road (a performance which had won Sidney's entire admiration) ; there was the proud look with which Nan had turned to her father when he, Sidney, chanced to be talking of the fashion in which the Greeks had glorified wrestling and boxing and all athletic games ; and there was the curious fact that Mr. Summers seemed to have cut himself off from all his former companions, even refusing Nan's repeated prayer that he should bring some of

them about the house, to cheer him up a bit. But would a professional pugilist—even granting that a strong, animal-like instinct of affection was no certain key to any one's nature—would a person accustomed to the battering of the prize-ring be likely to show that assiduous care in small trifles which made Mr. Summers's treatment of his daughter such a beautiful thing to look at?

Meanwhile, between mother and son not a single further word had been uttered on this momentous subject. Sidney, at first indignantly incredulous, controlled himself (indeed he could not be in any wise discourteous to the stately, silver-haired dame of whom he was so fond and proud) and would wait until he could procure a definite refutation of the charge that had been made; Mrs. Hume, more confident of her position, was content to abide the result of this disclosure. And of that result she had no doubt whatsoever. Youth might be absurdly romantic (though this son of hers had scarcely ever seemed to have a look to throw a woman's way), but it was too impossible to imagine that the last of all these splendid Humes, the inheritor of all her remaining hopes, would think of bringing the daughter of a prize-fighter into the family.

*"Whate'er hath end, whate'er begins,
There'll aye be Hays while Teviot rins"*——

but Thomas the Rhymer could not have foreseen the contingency of this climax of disgrace. And no such thing would happen. It was all too inconceivable. Her tall and handsome boy had got into some unfortunate blunder, had perhaps been deceived; but now that his eyes were open there would be an end. The girl was pretty, no doubt—even a beautiful creature, if the truth were confessed; and she had good manners; and an attractive kind of simplicity and directness that won for her favour: it was easy to understand how any young fellow might have had his senses confused for the moment. Even the father, if it came to that, though he had hardly the bearing of a gentleman, was harmless enough—diffident—keeping himself out of the

way—apparently conscious of his position and in a sort of fashion apologetic for it. All the same the idea of introducing the daughter of an ex-pugilist as the latest accession to the great family of the Hays and Humes was too preposterous to be entertained for a moment : and this brisk and confident lady, emboldened by the unvarying success of a lifetime, brushed such a possibility aside as not worth regarding, and only waited for Sidney to be definitely and finally convinced.

At breakfast the same embarrassing silence prevailed, on that one point ; but Mrs. Hume affected to be very cheerful, and would give him the last news she had heard from the various members of the family—perhaps with some covert and skilful design of recalling him to a sense of the duties of his position. It was all a talk about Jeanie, and Philip, and Agatha, and the rest—arrangements for the autumn—house parties—grouse-moors—salmon-fishings—to say nothing of the festivities of the remaining weeks in town : a picture of a fine array of people healthily and busily employed in amusing themselves.

“ But poor dear Helen,” continued Mrs. Hume, compassionately—and she spoke of Lady Helen quite as if she belonged to this domestic set. “ It is really too selfish and inconsiderate of her father to go and leave her to shift for herself. Men only—nothing but men—at that Perthshire lodge of his. Not that her tastes and inclinations lie that way at all. I know what she is dreaming of ; she is dreaming of Corfu, and Santa Maura, and Sappho’s Leap, and Ithaca with the Odyssey as her guide, and Mycenae, and moonlight nights on the Acropolis. That is one thing about my dearest Helen ; she has imagination, and sympathy ; when you talk to her, there is response. And she has been quite frequently to the British Museum of late—to the gem-room, chiefly——”

When she mentioned the British Museum, it was not to the gem-room his mind instantly carried him ; rather he bethought him of a certain panathenaic amphora decorated

with figures of Greek boxers about to engage. But he said nothing. It was not a time for taunts or sarcasm. The situation was too grave.

Directly after breakfast he went along into the town ; if this story about Mr. Summers were well known he would soon get at the bottom of it. And he had not gone far when he perceived Dick Erridge, who was standing with several companions in front of the Red Lion. Dick eyed the new-comer somewhat askance and coldly. It is true he had determined to act the part of a noble and generous rival ; he would show more distinctly than ever that he was no 'bounder' ; nevertheless, the old Adam, lying deep, occasionally begrudges these high resolves. But Sidney went right up to him.

"Can you spare me a couple of minutes ?" he said ; and therewith Dick left his knot of acquaintances ; and the two young men walked a few yards away, so that they could converse without risk of being overheard.

"Didn't you tell me," Sidney began, in his direct fashion, "that Mr. Summers had been a trainer, a well-known trainer of race-horses ?"

Dick looked rather uneasy.

"Oh, well," he said, evasively, "he made his little pile on the turf, don't you know—and it's all in the same swim—everybody in America is called a Colonel——"

"What I want to know is this," Sidney broke in, impatiently. "Is it true, or is it not true, that Mr. Summers was ever in the prize-ring—was he ever a professional pugilist ?——"

The puffy short young man seemed a little frightened.

"Well, yes, he was——" he stammered.

"They why the mischief didn't you honestly say so ?" Sidney exclaimed, in a blaze of anger.

But at this Dick Erridge plucked up his spirit somewhat.

"Oh, it's all very easy," said he—"it's all very easy to talk. But when you're asked to say what a man has been, you can't begin and recite his biography right off the reel."

Perhaps I forgot to tell you who were his godfathers and godmothers ? It's quite true that Jim Summers—that Mr. Summers—was at one time in the ring ; but it's a great many years ago ; and when he had got funds enough, he started as a book-maker ; and it's as a book-maker that he lived and flourished—flourished pretty well, I take it—until he retired from active business altogether, and came to set up house here at Crowhurst. Perhaps I should have told you ; but some people have such prejudices ; and then it was only a casual question, as I thought—I did not know that you were personally concerned—I did not anticipate the little communication that was made to me yesterday, or I might have been more careful——”

Sidney guessed what the poor chap meant, and his anger softened.

“Then Mr. Summers was not a trainer, but a book-maker—is that so ? Let's have the truth !” he exclaimed.

“I may have said trainer instead of book-maker,” Dick confessed. “But, bless you, they're all in a system—bookies, trainers, jockeys, and gee-gees, to say nothing of the noble owners—they're all in a system ; and sometimes you give a man the benefit of a courtesy title, in passing the time of day, don't you know. A book-maker ?—I should think so ! Did you never hear of ‘honest Jim Summers’ ? Ah, but you're not in that line, of course—cloisters pale——”

He looked up, and perceived that his companion, plunged in a profound reverie, was hardly listening to him :

“There's nothing wrong, is there ?” he asked anxiously. “There's no harm done ? There's not going to be any alteration !——”

Sidney was silent for a moment or two : these were strange contingencies he had now to face. Then he said slowly, and in a half-absent sort of way :

“No, I don't think there is anything wrong—no, I don't think so.”

For when once he had yielded to the glamour of Nan's eyes—close by this very spot where he now stood—under

the shadow of St. Mary's Church—then all that had happened subsequently could not very well have happened otherwise, no matter what information had been vouchsafed him. When once he had discovered that the world held for him but the one woman, and had further discovered, to his inexpressible astonishment and joy, that her heart was well-inclined towards him, then social grades and distinctions became small things. One look from under her lashes—one touch of her hand—was of more consequence to him than any pride of birth or station. This was not romance, he said to himself. This was common-sense. He had but the one life to live; and here was the crown and glory of it, that he had been so happy and so fortunate as to secure.

He was standing in this pensive mood, scarcely listening to his companion, when he chanced to raise his eyes, for there was a vehicle passing near. It was Lady Helen's mail-phaeton, herself driving. Instinctively he raised his hat, but just as he did so he became conscious that the recognition she had accorded him was of a singularly cold description. No welcoming smile—no friendly glance; only the stiffest and shortest and briefest of bows; and then her face was set straight before her again, as if she would ostentatiously proclaim that only the most casual acquaintanceship existed between her and the young man. What could it all mean? He had given her no cause of offence that he knew of. Then he suddenly recalled the fact of his having passed Mrs. Spink on the previous day, when Nan was driving him in her phaeton along the Fair Mile. Had that enigmatical person carried her report of the encounter to Monks-Hatton Hall, perhaps with some darkly added innuendo? Well, he could not help it: he had other things—surely of sufficient urgency—to think of. And so he turned to Dick Erridge, whom it was his duty now to release.

"You are going on the river, I suppose?" he suggested.

"No, thanks," said Dick, in rather a down-spirited way. "I have had enough of Henley this journey. I shan't forget Henley in a hurry. I'm going to walk out to Crow-

hurst to do my P.P.C. ; and then I'm off home. I know when I've had enough."

Sidney felt sorry for this poor lad, the story of whose disappointment had been hinted to him on the previous evening by Mr. Summers.

"I will walk out with you, if you like," he said.

"Oh, very well," Dick responded ; and as they set forth together he continued his ingenuous talk, though not in such a gay mood as usual. "There's no quarrel between you and me—none : let that be understood. What I say is, it is for the lady to make her choice ; and when the lady has made her choice, then it is for her friends—her friends who are her friends—to rally. That's what I say. There's no spite and dog-in-the-manger business about me ; I'm not such a bounder as all that. I confess it's a little rough. Here's my grandfather gets it into his old noddle that my conversation is a cure for lumbago—my conversation !—a cure for lumbago ! Is anybody's conversation a cure for lumbago ? And then of a sudden you get this thing sprung on you ; and it's just as if you'd come a crowner over a five-barred gate, and you felt as if your head was digging up turnips twenty feet deep. But I don't bear malice. You lugged me out of the Thames. And Jim Summers's daughter is Jim Summers's daughter ; and when she wants a friend, I'm here—I'm on the spot, I am."

"I think she understands that anyway," said Sidney.

Then the other proceeded, with some air of apology :

"I don't say but that I should have told you that Mr. Summers had been a famous boxer once upon a time, and that he had made his money as a book-maker ; but I could not guess you were likely to stand in this relationship to him ; and people have prejudices. But mind you," said Dick, pluckily, "don't imagine there's anything that Jim Summers would hide, or that his daughter would hide. Don't imagine there's anything for him to be ashamed of. There's some of us would say it was all the other way

about. As for me, in my humble way, I tell you I would rather go to a race-meeting in the company of Mr. Summers than with any man in England, bar none. And I am proud that he takes any notice of me ; and allows me to call on him as a friend ; and if I had begun to think of other things, I suppose that was all my bally cheek, and that I have been jolly well served out. But as I say, I'm not going to whimper. I know what's what. When you get one between the eyes, you'd better sit down quietly and wait for the sponge. And this is my last word : if Jim Summers's daughter wants a friend, and asks me—she'll have to ask me, mind, for I'm not going to thrust myself on her—if she wants a friend, and appeals to me, she won't find me running away very fast."

"I think she understands that," said Sidney : he was becoming more and more convinced that there was a good deal of genuine human nature about this young man, despite his sensitiveness about his costume.

They found Nan busy in her rose-garden, her faithful and submissive attendant with her ; and they received a most kindly welcome. Dick had to be the spokesman for the two visitors ; for Sidney Hume was unusually silent ; while Dick, as it turned out, was inclined to be lugubrious.

"England's no place for me," he was saying despondently. "I'm no use to anybody. I may as well go away and see what's to be seen. I'm for a skip across the herring-pond, that's my idea—over to San Francisco, perhaps ; and if I'm there before the 20th August, I may have a look at Tim Mulligan after the Tasmanian Devil has been playing about with him for half an hour—not so much blather and bluster *then*. Or I might get away down to the other side of the world—to Australia : they must be a clever lot of Johnnies to cling on to the ground with their feet, with their heads hanging in the air. What is there in London, now the Albatross Club has gone bust?—nothing left but the halls, and it's the same sickening old game—the familiar old wheezes—night after night. No, England's

played out ; or perhaps I am played out ; anyhow I'm off."

"Nonsense, man !" said Mr. Summers, good-naturedly. "What's the use of talking like that ! Come along in-doors and I'll show you how I've altered the height of the pulleys." Whereupon Dick, with all the chirpiness for the moment gone out of him, was haled away ; and Sidney and Nan were left alone together.

But it was no ordinary lovers' confabulation that followed now, though the time and place were propitious. She went quickly forward to him—she put her hand on his arm—she looked anxiously up into his face.

"Sidney," she said, "you are troubled about something : what is it ?"

"It is nothing that need affect you, Nan," he made answer.

"But what affects you affects me ; and I want to know," she insisted. "What is it ?"

"Oh, well," he said, with grim irony—for he would make light of this matter, "it is a very common occurrence. When a man chooses a wife, his relatives invariably think he should have consulted them first ; and they are quite hurt, quite pained and hurt, because he has not done so, because of his want of consideration ; and of course they object, and disapprove, and may even become indignant——"

"I knew it—I guessed it at once," she said, with swift intuition. "It is your mother. I told you she would be my enemy——"

"She is not your enemy—how could she be your enemy ?" he remonstrated. "She has seen you ; she has talked with you : how could she have any objection to you of any kind whatsoever ?"

"The objection is to my father, then ?" the girl said, breathlessly. "Then she is more than my enemy !"

"Nan, Nan !" said he, with grave forbearance, "if there is to be trouble, that is not the way to face it. You cannot

expect people who have never seen you to understand what you are, and what your circumstances are, and have been. And I have a lot of relatives ; and I dare say they have intolerant prejudices like most other people ; and I shouldn't wonder if they began calling me names. But I ask you, Nan : did you ever hear of the calling of names hurting any one ? ”

“ It is more serious than that, Sidney,” she said, scrutinising his face with an almost piteous earnestness. “ I read it in your look the moment you came along. And it is something quite recent—something that has happened since yesterday. Trouble ? ” she went on, rather sadly. “ If there is to be trouble, it is not for myself I fear ; it is for you. And my father warned me. He said your people were not our people——”

“ Quite so,” he interjected. “ Perhaps so. But that need not prevent my becoming one of your people.”

“ He spoke to me once or twice,” she continued, unheeding, “ about breaking off the acquaintanceship. And I had resolved to do that——”

“ And a very pretty way you took,” he again interposed. “ A very pretty way of breaking off an acquaintanceship. Do you remember how you did it, Nan ? Do you remember the where and when ? There was a gate somewhere near, wasn't there—up on a high ridge—between the tall hedges. Can you tell me what colour of dress you wore ?—because if you can't, I can tell *you*. And was it your straw hat or another, and what were the flowers ? And when your hands were held tight, had your upturned eyes anything to say, or hadn't they ? And the wind had been rather rude with your hair ; the tangles had to be smoothed down a little—wasn't that so ? Oh, yes, a very pretty way of breaking off an acquaintanceship, an admirable way, an excellent way ; suppose we try it now—if old John the gardener has discreetly disappeared ? ”

For that look of foreboding and concern had quite gone from his face. What did he care for all those Hays and

Humes, for Thomas the Rhymer and Teviot-side and its tower, when Nan's speedwell eyes were regarding him, now doubting and timorous, again half inclined to gather courage, and when these stray waifs of golden-brown hair had such need of smoothing and petting? No doubt they had their fine lands and houses—those relatives of his—Ellerdale and the rest : here Nan was in her own kingdom—of roses and yellow pansies, of sweet-williams and honeysuckle, of monkshood and musk and columbine ; and the white day was shining around them, and the air was soft and fragrant with changing scents ; and the sweet desire of youth was drawing those two together with a force at once unsuspected, inscrutable and imperious. 'Cypris the terrible' was no longer terrible ; now she was a gracious queen, smiling benignly—on two lovers lost in their land of enchantment.

All the rest of that day Sidney wandered away through the country lanes by himself, searching out certain problems ; and when he returned to Lilac Lodge there was barely time for him to dress for dinner. As he and his mother sat down at table Mrs. Hume said, blithely enough :

"I wonder what has become of Helen ; I quite understood she expected us to go along to the Hall this evening, to see the illuminations ; but there has not been a single word or a line of a message."

He changed the subject without apology.

"Mater," he said, in his grave and simple way, "I have been making inquiries about what you told me last night. You were right—and I was wrong. It is not true that Mr. Summers was a trainer : I was misinformed about that. And it is true that he was connected with the prize-ring, for a time, many years ago ; but as soon as he could he left it, and became a book-maker ; and now he has retired from the betting-ring as well ; and is—what you see him. These, as far as I can make out, are the facts."

She concealed her triumph.

"Of course I have nothing to say against the man," she said. "Of course not—a very worthy man, no doubt, in his own sphere. And I am sorry for any disappointment that the daughter may suffer——"

"But the daughter won't suffer any disappointment, as far as I can help it," he observed, calmly.

She stared at him with startled eyes.

"Sidney!" she exclaimed. "You don't mean to say you can be so mad as to dream of keeping on those relations—now you know the truth?"

"I mean to say that the relations between myself and Anne Summers are precisely what they were," he made answer; "and I see no reason why they should change."

"But the prize-ring!" she cried. "The betting-ring!"

"What has she got to do with either?" he asked. "*She* never was in the prize-ring. *She* never was in the betting-ring——"

"But the low associations—the horrible associations——"

"What associations has she come in contact with?" he demanded, with something more of warmth. "She has been brought up all her life in a vicar's family down in Somersetshire."

"So it comes to this, then," his mother said, with bitter emphasis, "that the youngest of the Humes of Ellerdale proposes to marry the daughter of a prize-fighter, an ex-champion, a common pugilist: that is the prospect, is it?"

In her overmastering indignation she could say no more. She rose from the table, crossed the floor, opened the door for herself, and swept from the room. He did not see her again that evening.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AT AN OPEN WINDOW.

MRS. HUME was desperate, but not yet despairing ; she was a woman of quick resource, intrepid, and confident, who had met and overcome many difficulties in her long career of success ; and she was not likely to yield without a struggle now. And the very first thing she did, early the next morning, was to send for a cab to take her along to Monks-Hatton Hall.

Arrived there, she was shown into the drawing-room, and she went up to one of the windows, to look abroad over the river and its banks, where the work of dismantling had already begun ; but she turned quickly enough when she heard the door open again ; and here was her dearest Helen, advancing and smiling a welcome to her. Lady Helen was attired in an extremely pretty morning gown ; but she herself was not looking very well ; the London season had left traces of lassitude and fatigue on her refined and delicate features ; besides, she had been taken unawares.

The two ladies kissed each other effusively.

“ I won’t apologise for calling at such an hour——”

“ I should think not,” said Lady Helen.

“ —for the fact is I’m in trouble, Helen dear,” Mrs. Hume went on, “ and the one comforting thing, when you’re in trouble, is to know the friend to whom you can turn for consolation and help. And that’s why I have come to you, dearest Helen. You are the only one who can save me—who can save all of us : you are the only one who can make us all happy and content again ; and you can do it so easily. I was saying to myself all the way along, ‘ How lucky to have dear Helen for an ally : everything will be put right now.’ ”

Lady Helen’s surprise was clearly tempered by incredulity.

“ My dear Mrs. Hume,” said she, smiling, “ it is impossible to associate any very serious trouble with you—you who are

so self-reliant, and so clever, and so capable of judging of affairs. How can you be in trouble?—and how is it possible that I could be of help to you of all people?”

“But you can, dear,” Mrs. Hume proceeded, “and you only. I have come to you about Sidney——”

There was an almost imperceptible quiver of Lady Helen’s eyelids; and from this instant the expression of her face was changed: she was no longer a smiling and affectionate confidante—she had become a watchful listener, reserved, and cold, and cautious.

“You know, Helen, what has been the dearest wish of my heart for many a day back,” Mrs. Hume continued—with a sort of pathetic appeal to that impassive face. “And everything was going on so well, as I imagined—and everything will go well yet—oh, yes indeed—I am hopeful enough—only there must be a little forethought and discretion. Young men are such strange creatures; such trifling things strike their fancy for the moment—the turn of a lip, a profile, anything. You know the bronze head in the Castellani collection: well, I’ve heard that long lad of mine just rave about the expression of the mouth; and of course if he came across that in a human being, it would interest him for the moment—for the moment——”

“Really, Mrs. Hume,” said Lady Helen, with an alarming stiffness of manner, “I don’t see how I am concerned——”

“But I only wished to show you, dear,” continued Mrs. Hume, in no wise put out, “how these fancies may attract for the moment, and draw a young man away from the serious interests of life—but only for the moment. And that is how it stands with Sidney. That is my trouble; and I ask you for help. He has fallen in with two people—father and daughter—who are not at all in his own sphere—but Sidney was always very independent in that way: however, there is no doubt he has found some passing attraction in the girl—some attraction of the moment—and unless he is interfered with, goodness knows what may happen. Some absolute absurdity, no doubt. I suppose he

would tell us that as regards marriage his incomparable Greeks recognised no difference of birth or station, so long as the two high contracting parties were Greek citizens. But we have got to prevent his marching on to any such fatuity ; and it rests with you, Helen."

"Indeed it does not," said Lady Helen, decisively. "Indeed it does not. I can have nothing to do with the matter."

"But I appeal to you as a friend—as a daughter—for it is as a daughter I have been regarding you for many a day back—I appeal to you," the anxious mother said, "not to balk all the hopes we have been forming for both you and him. We have all of us been looking on it as quite settled—and so it might be if you will only do as I ask you——"

"Mrs. Hume, I cannot comprehend you!" Lady Helen protested.

"Shall I be more explicit?"

"If you please!"

"Very well, then. Sidney has got into an entanglement with this girl, and for the moment will not listen to reason. But you can bring him back to reason, and restore him to us, if you like. And quite easily!"

"And how?" asked Lady Helen, with ominous coldness—but she was listening and watching intently.

"Surely," said Mrs. Hume, "surely after all the attention he paid you in London, after the constant association that was observed by every one—for of course I know nothing of any private understanding—surely you have the right to go to him and say that you consider him bound in honour to you. Then how can he refuse? And he is so bound: I have told him so! His honour is pledged: how can he draw back? Surely that is a simple solution of the difficulty!—and we shall all be so grateful to you, and I shall have my dear Helen as my daughter, for that has been the dream of my life ever since I saw you and him together."

The strangest smile appeared in Lady Helen's face—a smile of tranquil amusement.

"You have indeed brought a budget of surprises with you this morning, my dear Mrs. Hume," she said. "But this is the most astonishing of all. You arrange a very pretty little scheme with regard to your son and myself without in the least taking into account what my inclinations might be. Did it never occur to you that I might have quite other views? Did it never occur to you that you might be considering an absolute impossibility—something that never for a moment could have entered Sidney's head or my own—not mine, at all events!"

Her audacity was almost bewildering.

"Helen, how can you say so!" Mrs. Hume exclaimed. "Never entered your head even as a possibility!—when you and I have talked over this project again and again—when you knew how I was looking forward to its being realised——"

"Pardon me, my dear Mrs. Hume," said Lady Helen, sweetly, "but you forget. You have mentioned such a thing to me once or twice, I know. But you do not seem to remember what I have invariably answered you on such occasions. Haven't I always assured you that you were looking forward to a chimera? Haven't I always told you that the only thing he could tolerate about me was my name, because of Helen of Troy? And then there's another point," she continued, with some spirit. "It isn't merely what Mr. Sidney may say or do. There must be some disposition on both sides. And I must tell you frankly, dear Mrs. Hume, that his wandering fancies are welcome to wander, so far as I am concerned—quite welcome, indeed. How you could have imagined anything else I cannot conceive for a moment. How you could have imagined that it mattered to me one pin's point what girl he had fallen in with—and how you could have thought that I should be willing to call him back—even if he were willing to come—it is all beyond my comprehension! Sidney and I were always very good friends, in a kind of a way; but as for anything else——"

"Helen," said Mrs. Hume, angrily, "what brooch is that you are wearing?"

Well, it was the little Roman charm that Sidney had given her; and she had had it very cunningly fixed up with delicate chain-work of platinum and gold. On being thus challenged, she flushed in confusion, hastily unpinned the brooch, and threw it aside.

"One picks up anything when one is in a hurry in the morning," she said, impatiently. "It was an accident."

"Helen, dear," said Mrs. Hume, in a more pacific fashion, "I am an older woman than you, and I have seen more of human nature. Perhaps, as regards Sidney and yourself, if the way were clearer, you would not be quite so callous and indifferent? Only, as I understand you, you won't help me to have the way made clearer?—"

"Not in the manner you suggest—certainly not!" Lady Helen answered distinctly. "Why, the very idea is preposterous! My dear Mrs. Hume, you must allow me to retain a little self-respect!"

Mrs. Hume rose.

"Helen," she said, quietly, "if you knew how I look upon you, and if you knew all that I had been anticipating, you would know that I could never ask you to do anything inconsistent with your self-respect. I came to you in my trouble, and asked for your help, and it seems you cannot give it me. Very well, there may be some other means."

She prepared to take her departure, but Lady Helen did not ring the bell; she herself accompanied her friend into the hall, and opened the front door for her, while both of them lingered for a moment, perhaps reluctant to say the last word.

"At least I may let you know what happens?" Mrs. Hume said. "The subject is not forbidden?"

"Whatever concerns you will always have an interest for me, you know that," said the younger woman; and then they kissed, and separated; and Mrs. Hume drove away. Finally Lady Helen went back to the drawing-room to re-

cover the little Roman bell that she had thrown aside : it would not do to have the servants examining such things.

And now Mrs. Hume, as she drove off, appeared to be in more tragic case than ever. What would all those proud families of Hays and Humes have to say to her ? They seemed to stand ranged as an accusing host, regarding her with indignant and upbraiding eyes. She had been—for her—curiously remiss and supine. Why had she not discovered this entanglement before ? Why had she not brought matters to a definite climax when Sidney and Helen Yorke were both in London, and constantly together ? And now that she had in some wild way to retrieve these blunders, she found herself painfully alone. Her handsome boy, who had always been so much her companion and ally—and always courteously obedient to her—was now in open revolt, drawn away by the wiles of another woman. As for Helen Yorke, Mrs. Hume understood 'pretty well the value of that young lady's audacious denials and asseverations ; she guessed that if any signs became visible of Sidney returning to his proper allegiance, dearest Helen would be discovered to be in a very different mood. But, alone as she was, she did not even yet despair. Helen's defection—which was clearly dictated by pure selfishness—was disappointing ; but a baffled person is not necessarily beaten. Surely there were other means ? For it seemed absolutely incredible to her that this ghastly thing should take place : surely there must be some intervention, coming from somewhither ?

She had heedlessly told the driver of this open fly to take her back again to Lilac Lodge ; but on the way they arrived at the little triangular enclosure of trees and bushes that marks the junction of the Medmenham and Oxford roads ; and here, on a sudden impulse, she called to him to stop. The man pulled up, and turned round, awaiting orders. At the moment she had none to give. She was looking away along the Fair Mile, and considering. What if she were to drive out to Crowhurst there and then ?

What if, by an extraordinary stroke of luck, she were to find the girl absent, and the father left in possession ! If she could only get at Mr. Summers by himself, she thought she could effectively deal with him. He was a submissive kind of man ; he appeared to be solicitous about his daughter's happiness ; if he were persuaded that this foolish scheme would only end in misery for everybody concerned, then he would refuse his consent—he would take her away—he would do something—and all this imbroglio would gradually resolve itself. No doubt the girl would have fits of crying and sobbing—for a time. People who cross the Bay of Biscay in bad weather sometimes wish they were dead ; but when they have rounded Gib, and got into the smoother waters and milder airs of the Mediterranean, they soon revive ; long before they have reached Malta they are up on deck again and as merry as crickets, with warm sunshine around them and blue seas and cloudless heavens ; and by the time they are gliding in under the yellow walls of Fort St. Elmo, and climbing the steep thoroughfare, and wandering along the Strada Reale, they have not a care or perplexity in their heart, save perhaps a frantic desire to purchase lace handkerchiefs at thirty-six shillings a dozen instead of the regulation forty-two.

She hesitated no longer—she was ruthless, a mother defending her last remaining son.

“Do you know Crowhurst ?” she said to the man on the box. “Away beyond the Traveller's Rest—up in the woods——”

“Yes'm.”

“Drive there then, please.”

And as they went placidly along the Fair Mile, her brain was busy. What arguments, what inducements and persuasions, could she best bring to bear on this girl's father ? But he seemed a quiet, unassuming, biddable sort of man, who obviously knew his station : she did not anticipate much resistance on his part.

When they reached Crowhurst, she bade the driver of

the cab wait for her in the roadway ; she descended, opened the gate for herself, and walked up to the house. As she did so, she heard a sound of music—one of Mendelssohn's Songs without Words, being played very softly and sympathetically : the window of the drawing-room was open to the garden. For a second she paused, in vexation ; clearly the girl was at home ; it was more likely the father who was absent. Nevertheless Mrs. Hume had not come all this way for nothing ; she was a resolute person ; she walked up to the door and rang the bell ; and when the young maidservant informed her that Mr. Summers was out, but that she could see Miss Anne, she accepted that invitation, and followed the maid into the modest little hall. There was a tapping at the drawing-room door ; a ' Come in ! ' and presently Mrs. Hume found herself face to face with her enemy, who had risen from the piano. Both forgot to shake hands ; for half a second there seemed to be miles of silence and distrust between these two ; and Nan's fingers, as she sought relief from her confusion and vague apprehension in the actual business of bringing forward a lounging-chair, distinctly trembled. Her heart was like lead.

"I am so glad to find you at home, Miss Summers," the tall, silver-haired lady said, in her blandest fashion—for she had no desire to overawe or frighten the pretty and timid young thing who now took a seat opposite her : that was not her way of setting to work at all. "I had hoped perhaps to see your father ; but I dare say I can explain the object of my visit quite as well to you, perhaps better. And I hope there will be nothing said that will cause you pain—I have no wish to do that—though to be sure, there are few situations in life that have not their vexations and disappointments—sometimes cruel enough at the moment——"

She, at all events—this stately dame with the fresh and bright complexion, the clear, shrewd eyes and confident air—seemed to have encountered that inevitable legion of sorrows without sustaining any very material damage.

"Sidney has told me," she went on, "of this idle day-

dream of his. But you know what young men are—or rather you don't, for you have had no experience—whereas I have—plenty—I have had to study both them and their wild, impracticable whims and humours, that last for an hour or two, and are then happily forgotten. And Sidney cannot be expected to be wiser than the rest of them—he has seen little of the world—buried in his college occupations and his books ; and this last idea of his—well, I suppose it is not more absurd than most of the projects of impetuous and flighty young men who don't know their own mind——”

“But, Mrs. Hume,” Nan interposed, “why do you come to me ? Why do you not say all this to himself ?”

“Because he is so hot-headed, like the rest of them. Now you,” continued this astute lady, in her pleasant manner, “you are reasonable. Any physiognomist could tell you that—you have a calm judgment, and intelligence. And you will understand how this fancy that my son has formed for you—very natural—oh, yes, I don't wonder at it in the least—but still it is a mere fancy, and it can lead to nothing—unless, indeed, it leads to the misery of every one concerned.”

Nan sat mute and attentive, not uttering a word—though something in her heart seemed to say, ‘Sidney, why are you away from me !’

“Perhaps I do not set as much store as some do on pride of race, and social position,” Mrs. Hume proceeded. “And I have heard of marriages between people in different ranks of life that turned out well enough—rare instances, no doubt. But in your case, dear Miss Summers—I hope you will pardon me if I speak plainly—there is an insuperable barrier, that you must yourself recognise ; and that insuperable barrier is—your father's career. No—have patience ! Do not be angry. I have not a word of blame. But the fact exists. And if I were to ask you now—in plain language—whether you would like to marry into a family that would look down on your father——”

"I would not do it—I would do no such thing!" Nan broke in.

"But that is the whole position," rejoined the elder woman, triumphantly. "That is the whole position! Of course I knew what you, as an affectionate daughter, would say. And that shows you the impossibility——"

"And why should they look down on my father?" said Nan, warmly. "Has he ever pretended to be other than he is? Has he ever concealed anything—or been found out? Has he ever done anything disgraceful, or to be ashamed of? And you must remember this, Mrs. Hume, that we never asked to be admitted into your family. It was your son who came here——"

"Quite so—quite so," said Mrs. Hume, eager to appease. And then she shook her head in a mournful and sympathetic way. "It is altogether a sad position of affairs; and I can see no way out of it, unless Sidney and you have the courage and the common sense to do the right thing, and that is to break off an attachment that could only lead to misery and repentance. I am sorry, in a way. It might have been otherwise, but for this unhappy obstacle. But then, you see, how could that ever be got over? Your father, as you know, was connected with the prize-ring, was a professional betting-man. Well, English society is tolerant—very tolerant, as it had need to be in these days—but I am afraid a line would be drawn——"

"We will not ask any one to draw any line," said Nan, proudly.

"Mind you," continued Mrs. Hume, still cunningly anxious to propitiate, "not one of us has a word to say against you personally. Of course not—certainly not. And I will admit that in other circumstances I might have been most pleased to welcome you as a daughter-in-law. But you must perceive for yourself—here is your father——"

Nan had had about enough of this. All her despairing thoughts of her lover were for the moment swept out of her

mind by her devotion and loyalty to one whom she had known more closely, all through the years of her life.

"Yes, indeed," she said—and there was no cringing about her, or piteous pleading: if her figure was slight, it was as erect as that of the tall lady who now confronted her; and her mouth was fearless—if her lips were somewhat pale. "Yes, indeed, there is my father. And if that is the question you came to ask, Mrs. Hume, then this is my answer—that I mean to remain by him. I will not ask your family whether they look down on him or not: they shall not have the opportunity. That is all I have to say; and it is enough."

There may have been some phrases of justification or apology added to Mrs. Hume's saying good-bye; but these at least were not overheard by a man who now rose from the iron garden-seat outside the open drawing-room window, and walked slowly away, with his head downcast. It was Nan's father. Coming back from his morning ramble and his pipe, he had noticed the cab at the gate, and wondered that a visitor should arrive so early. But he would not interrupt Nan. He kept outside. And then, as he chanced to go by the open window, he heard a voice that he did not seem at first to recognise. He drew nearer. There was some talk about himself—about himself and Nan; and as he had no scruples at all where Nan's welfare was concerned, he sat down on the garden-seat and listened. And when the visitor rose to go, he rose also, and departed. His sallow face had become of an ashen-gray.

He walked with slow and laboured footsteps along the path—Nan's columbines and pinks and campanulas were all unheeded now—until he found himself in a small summer-house, and there he again sat down, breathing somewhat hard. His two hands—curiously enough he had withdrawn his arm from the sling, that now hung useless round his neck—were placed on the rude table in front of him, and they were clenched as in the grip of a vice; his eyes were staring before him. He remained so for not

more than half a minute. He rose, with a heavy sigh, and went out into the whiter light. And then, glancing for a moment towards the house—as if he feared that Nan might make her appearance to claim him—he made his way into the orchard, opened a door in the brick wall, and passed into the larch plantation, whence he could, if he chose, gain the Henley road. But he had no thought of going in that direction. He only wished to be alone—with his agony.

Late that evening, when they had come in from their final stroll, they found that the lamps in the dining-room had just been lit; but they did not draw the curtains; for now and again there was a flash of summer lightning outside; and it was something to look at—the vivid gleam of pale orange across the deep blue-black of the window-panes. Nan, when she had attended to her father's wants, took her accustomed seat beside him, her head resting against his knee.

“Dodo,” said she, with much affectation of cheerfulness, “you must tell me what it is you have been thinking about the whole of this day. I know there is something. Is it money? For I fear we are far too extravagant in this house; and we could so easily economise——”

“No, no, Nan,” he answered, hastily. “You must not dream of that. I wish you would not worry half so much over those books: we can well afford a little more freedom. What was I thinking about?—oh, it is so difficult to say! And you,” he added, timidly—as if inviting and yet dreading her confidence, “have you had nothing to think of all the day long?”

But this was a brave-hearted lass; she could keep her bitter griefs, her sad renunciations, to herself—for the dark watches of the night.

“Oh, nothing to speak of,” she made answer, in rather a low voice.

Both were silent for a considerable time—he with his head sunk in his bosom, his eyes haunted and haggard, his face sombre. And then he said slowly,

"I am going up to London to-morrow, Nan."

"Yes, Dodo?"

"For a day only—perhaps two days," he went on. "I—I want to see Dick Erridge—I have some business affairs to arrange. You must amuse yourself as best you can until I come back, you know. And keep light-hearted, Nan—keep a light heart; it's wonderful how troubles disappear, when you might least expect it. Yes, I must see Dick Erridge—I must get hold of Dick—Dick and I may have some matters to put straight."

She did not notice that his clenched right hand, resting on the table, shook as if with the palsy. She herself had a sufficiency of things to think of—as she waited and watched for those sudden gleams across the blue-black panes.

CHAPTER XIX.

AN ALLY.

DICK ERRIDGE'S chambers in London were close by Piccadilly Circus—a convenient centre for theatres and music halls; they were plentifully decorated with photographs of actresses, famous and otherwise; and on this particular morning a cigarette-box, a liqueur-bottle, and two small glasses stood on the central table of the sitting-room. Dick himself was reading a sporting paper; but he quickly threw that aside when he heard a heavy footstep on the stairs without; he had received a telegram—and was expecting his hero and friend.

"Well, this is something like!" he exclaimed, joyfully, as Mr. Summers made his appearance on the landing. "This is a sight for sore eyes! And how long are you to be up?—two or three nights I hope—fact is, the complexion of this town wants altering—it's too pale—we'll give it a little tinge——"

His speech died away into silence. There was something unusual in this man's face as he came into the light.

"Dick," said Nan's father, sinking into a chair, "you spoke the other day of going to Australia. You're not going just at once, are you? You haven't made all your arrangements yet, have you? For I'm going with you—I'll go with you, Dick—and then, you see, when you're tired of the place and want to come home again, then that's all right—you'll leave me there. You see, I'm not coming back—I'm not coming back any more to England."

Erridge stared at him.

"Why, what's all this about?" he cried.

"Only that I'm in the way, Dick—I'm in the way—God help me, I'm in the way!"

He rose and went to the window; and Dick did not follow him. He remained there some time. When he returned and resumed his seat he looked tired and languid, and he seemed to breathe with difficulty.

"I want to make it easy for Nan," he said. "I want to make it all right for her. They'll have no objection to her if I'm out of the way; and if I lose myself in Australia, and cut off all communication, and never come back to England again, why, it's as good as if I were a dead man. Oh, I can quite understand their view—it's natural: I can quite understand. For one thing, the young people mightn't like my turning up at their house—they might have company come in, don't you see—and yet they would be too good-natured to show any annoyance; and then again I should be a constant source of offence to those relatives—there might be words bandied—and Nan, she is proud, you know—there would be continual trouble. But now, this way, there can't be any trouble. I simply clear out; and Nan, when she goes amongst these people, will soon make friends—for she is a happy kind of creature—she will soon make friends with all of them, will Nan. And you'll write and tell me about it, Dick; that will be the only communication I shall have with the old country; and it will have to be kept a secret in your hands alone, my lad, for it is just possible Nan might want to find out where I was——"

"Oh, but look here," Dick Erridge exclaimed, when he had sufficiently recovered from his astonishment, "you needn't suppose for an instant that Miss Anne would let you go! She wouldn't accept such a tremendous sacrifice——"

"Oh, yes, she will," the other said.

"And even supposing she were to consent—I don't believe it for a moment—but of course you are her father—you may order her—perhaps she may obey you. Very good. But what I want to say is this," continued Dick, with increasing warmth, "that even if she were willing to let such a thing happen, what about Hume, what about that fellow Hume? Is he going to allow it? Is he going to allow you to be sacrificed in such a way—banished from your own country—and banished from your own daughter, which is a heap worse, as I take it—is he going to allow all this merely to save the feelings of his relatives and connections? Because this is what I've got to say, and I'm not going to make any bones about it: if he allows you to be treated like that, then I call him a howling cad. I don't care what his fine friends and relatives are: if he is going to accept such a sacrifice at your hands, I call him nothing else than a howling cad—that's what I call him, and I'll stick to it—I'm d——d if I don't stick to it."

"Well, Dick, you *can* talk the most infernal nonsense when you've a mind that way," Summers said, angrily. (But the young man did not heed. His breathless indignation may have left his cheeks a little paler even than usual: nevertheless, he had had his say.) "Here are you pronouncing judgment, and you've only heard of this proposal within five minutes. And I've had all yesterday and all last night—for you may suppose I did not sleep much last night—to plan it out and make it practicable. Supposing I tell you I have a scheme that will make it impossible for either of them to refuse?—and what's more, they will think I am going away to Australia quite happy and content. And perhaps," he added, more slowly, and his eyes had an absent look in them, "perhaps—in time—

perhaps—I shall be quite happy and content—if I have made it all right for Nan.”

“I know I’m an ass,” said Dick, gloomily. “Still, I must speak out sometimes. And I’m a bad host, too,” he proceeded, as he rose and fetched the two small glasses and the liqueur-bottle. “But you rather stumped me—took my breath away, in fact. Here, have a nip of kummel, and light a cigarette, and we’ll stroll along to Mentavisti’s: it’s just about lunch-time; and if we’re going to Australia together, there will be plenty to talk over and arrange.”

They walked along to the restaurant; and presently it became clear that Erridge, in his capacity of host, had been early abroad and made every preparation: a small sidetable had been reserved for them; a quite sumptuous little banquet—an unnecessarily sumptuous little banquet—gradually made its appearance: the Chianti was excellent. Mr. Summers hardly looked at either food or drink.

“The steamers sail every other week, don’t they?” he was saying. “There are offices down in Pall Mall—I’ve seen the models in the window. We might go in and look at the plans——”

“Are you in such a hurry as all that?” the younger man asked.

“Oh, no, no,” he answered, anxiously. “Whatever will suit your convenience, Dick. Only—only, I was thinking—that the sooner every one knew that I had dropped out—no longer any bother to any one—the better that would be. Oh, no, I don’t want to hurry you, my lad—I will wait your convenience—only, I should like to have the thing over. And perhaps you won’t mind my being rather a glum companion for a bit——”

“Now listen to me,” Dick broke in, impatiently. “I may be a fool, but I have the blessed privilege of knowing my own mind. And if this thing has to be, then it is for you to say how it is to be; and I am there. You do as you like; and I’m your most obedient: them’s my sentiments

—and here's your health—and a pleasant voyage to both of us. If there are people in this country who think you are not good enough for them, it's the other way about with me; and I tell you it will be a proud day for me when you and I go together to see the running for the Melbourne Cup. Oh, we'll have some fun! All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy; and I'm about run out here—my brain overtaxed—trying to discover the fun of the music-hall wheezes. We'll have some fun, I tell you! And I'm not back in England yet. I think the Australian climate may very likely suit me—shouldn't wonder a bit. I say," he continued, regarding his guest rather significantly, "it won't be what you might call chilly, going down the Red Sea, will it? Quite mild, eh? No need for beaver-lined coats? Well, I don't care! I've been in a hotter corner, with three full hands out all at once, and my poor sevens and twos being bashed against the wall as if a Nasmyth hammer was chasing them. Gracious goodness, man, why don't you eat or drink something? If it is to be, it is to be; and you give me my marching orders——"

"Sure it won't be taking you away——?" said Summers, doubtfully; and yet there was in his eyes a kind of piteous hunger for this companionship, in view of what was before him.

"My dear fellow, I shall be delighted!" Dick cried, with fine bravado: in his present mood the Bay of Biscay had no terrors for him. "I'll sell my cobs, and lend the dog-cart to the gov'nor, for safe-keeping: then I'm with you—and we'll have just a daisy time of it—sixpenny Nap every night in the smoking-room all the voyage out. And I think we'll have some fun down there, on the other side of the world—yes, I rather think so!—the Caulfield Cup—the Champion Stakes—we'll be able to talk big when we come back——"

"You forget, Dick," said Summers, in his grave, quiet way: "I'm not coming back."

Dick's face fell.

"It seems deuced hard luck," he said. "I wonder if there is any necessity for such an awful wrench——"

"Do you think I have not considered that?" the other asked. "Do you think I would leave my girl—never to see her again—if there was any other thing to be done? I heard enough yesterday. Mrs. Hume came out to Crowhurst. She told Nan that they—the rest of them—had no objection to Nan herself; she said she would like to welcome Nan as her daughter-in-law; but I was in the way. Well, I'm going out of the way: isn't that simple, my lad?"

"I wonder what Miss Anne will say to it all?" responded Dick; but as he would not again fall into a gloomy mood—when it was his duty to cheer up his guest and friend who appeared to be in sad straits—he proposed that they should now have coffee and a cigarette, and that Mr. Summers, who had eaten and drunk nothing, should make up for that by dining with him in the evening at the Café de Provence in Regent Street.

During the afternoon these two went about together—to the office of Mr. Summers's lawyer, where Dick sat patiently in an outer room, among the clerks—to the headquarters of certain steamship companies, where they inspected plans of cabins and inquired about dates of sailings—to a telegraph office, where Summers sent a friendly message down to Nan, while Erridge despatched a more business-like communication to the Café de Provence; and so forth; and all the time the younger of the two men was beset by the most conflicting sensations—wonder and joy at the prospect of a visit to Australia in the company of Jim Summers, with some desperately uneasy feeling that this holiday trip was no holiday trip at all, rather that there lay behind it some tragic catastrophe. And then again he would say to himself: 'Nonsense—the girl will not allow it! She cannot be so incredibly mean. He has done everything for her—lived for her—slaved for her—all these years; and of a sudden she throws him over so that she

may marry into a swell family. And Hume : what will he think of a girl capable of doing such a thing ? But perhaps those fastidious people are not so fastidious ? Crowhurst will sell for a goodish bit ; and Jim Summers's daughter will be provided for besides.'

As they sat at dinner—here again Mr. Summers would hardly look at food : nor was the dark and hopeless expression of his face dispelled by all this brilliancy of lights—at dinner Dick was in a more charitable frame of mind.

"We forgot one thing, mon ami," said he, cheerfully, "at those steamship offices ; we forgot to ask if they make a reduction on your taking a quantity. So much for two cabins with two berths each : but how much for three cabins with two berths each ? For that's what we shall want if you insist on going a trip to Australia. Do you think Miss Anne will stay behind ?—no fear ! One cabin for you ; one for me ; and one for a young lady by the name of Miss Anne Summers. That's what it'll come to !"

Nan's father looked up, half startled ; but only for a second ; his glance fell again, listlessly.

"I suppose you'd consider it awful cheek," Dick Erridge continued, "if I said I understood your daughter better than you did. Elephantine cheek, eh ? Nevertheless, that is my conviction. And I know she will not hear of your leaving England——"

"Man alive !" Summers said, peevishly, "how often must I tell you ! It will be all arranged and over before she has any chance of protesting——"

"Yes, and then ?" said Dick, boldly. "Advertising in newspapers—inquiry agents—perhaps herself coming out to Australia ! And of course she'll find you as easy as winking ; and all this anxiety and trouble gone for nix ! As I say, if you're on for a trip to Australia, I'm on too—and delighted ; but don't let's go away with any bee of that kind buzzin' about in our bonnets."

His guest did not answer ; perhaps it was too open and public a place for confidences ; perhaps his thoughts were elsewhere.

As they were leaving the restaurant, Summers said suddenly,

“Dick, couldn’t we go to a music hall now?”

Erridge looked surprised, but he answered at once :

“Oh, yes—oh, certainly. Rather too early for the best turns ; but there’ll be something going. Let me see, now. There’s the sisters Clovelly——”

“I don’t care what it is—that is of no consequence,” Summers said.

“Then we’ll stroll along to the Troc.—the Troc. or the Empire : we’ll have a look at the bill.”

Yet these two had scarcely the air of diners-out on their way to a music hall—the one plunged in dark reverie, the other doing his best to be communicative and inspiring, but perhaps becoming a little disheartened. And what surprised Dick Erridge still further was that, when they reached the entrance to the music hall, his companion hung back.

“No,” said he, in the strangest way. “No—I can’t begin just yet—give me breathing-time—I must think about it. Let’s go to your rooms, Dick, and have a quiet hour or two——”

“Right you are !” said Erridge, promptly. “The very thing ! Who wants to sit in a music hall at this time of the evening, when the busy little milliners have hardly got home from their shops yet ? We’ll come out for some of the later turns at the halls if you like.”

They returned to Erridge’s rooms—to tobacco and lounging-chairs.

“I’m afraid I’m an awful nuisance to you, Dick,” Summers said, rather moodily. “But I sha’n’t be in your way for long—I sha’n’t be in anybody’s way——”

“Oh, come,” Dick broke in, without ceremony, “I’m not going to have any talk like that. That is the result of

your eating and drinking nothing. Do you think you can live on your pipe alone? Here, old man, here's some Scotch, that will set you up to rights—Scotch and a drop of seltzer—say when."

But Summers paid little heed to these friendly offices on the part of his host; nor did that sombre look lift from his face.

"It's a hard thing I've got before me now, Dick," said he, with his head bent down, "a hard thing, and that's the fact. But other people have gone through as much—and perhaps for less cause. You don't know what Nan has been to me through these long years—ever since I came back from Australia—and found the little thing looking at me—with her mother's eyes. And now that all the happiness of her life is at stake, I'm not going to hesitate about a trifle more or less. What is it to me? I'm getting to the end—might be whisked off at any moment—so the doctors say; whereas she has all her life before her—and I am her father, her only guardian—I am bound to do what I can for her. I don't say it will be easy. I wouldn't envy any other man in my place. But it's got to be done."

"What has got to be done?" demanded Erridge, forgetting to light his cigarette.

His companion was silent for a time: when he spoke, it was as if there were some weight on his chest, that made his breathing laboured.

"It won't be easy, Dick," he went on. "God knows it won't be an easy thing for me. But then, you see, I've been telling her all along that Crowhurst was only an experiment. I have told her that if it did not answer we might try some other way. I wanted her to start clear—to form her own set of friends and acquaintances—to shape her own life as she thought best—leaving me and my crowd of the old days out. Well, see what has happened. Perhaps it was more or less accidental—his coming about: that can't be helped now. But I know that all her hopes look in one direction—the happiness of the whole of her

life has to be decided now—and I tell you it isn't a little thing that's going to keep me back from doing what I can for my Nan."

He drew a long breath, which was more of the nature of a sigh.

"You see, there's where it is. Perhaps you're right, Dick, perhaps she wouldn't like my going away from England for good, if everything was to be as it is at present; and I will say as much for young Hume—for I like him—straightforward, free-handed, generous-hearted sort of a chap—and I think if he saw that Nan was cut up about it, he would refuse as well. Now I'm going to make it so that neither of them can refuse. I've thought it all out, my lad—I've threshed it out—and that is the only way. Crowhurst was an experiment, I told you. Very well: I've got to tell Nan that so far as I am concerned it has been a complete failure; that I am sick-tired of it; that I'm off to lead my old life again—but away out of England altogether——"

Dick jumped from his chair as if he had been shot.

"So that's it?" he cried. "But I won't have it! I will tell her! I will tell her you're only shamming——"

And this, too, roused Jim Summers.

"And you call yourself my friend!" he said, sternly. "I tell you my secret in confidence, and you would go and betray me! Sit down!—and listen." He paused for a second or two, and resumed in quite an altered tone: "Dick, man, Dick, don't make it harder for me—it will be hard enough! If I have to show Nan that I am dissatisfied with her, and with Crowhurst, and that I've only been pretending to be satisfied, it will be something if I can come to you, and talk to you, and tell you that I never was dissatisfied—never with Nan, surely! There was the music hall to-night," he continued—this usually grave and silent man grown quite pitifully garrulous in his despair and grief. "I meant to have told her I had spent a gay evening in town—with old pals and all the rest of it—and then—then

I kind of begged to be let off this once : I'll have to begin soon enough. And it won't be easy, Dick—it won't be easy—to tell Nan that I have been disappointed with her—disappointed—with Nan !——”

His arm fell on the table, his head sank on his arm, and he burst into a fit of uncontrollable sobbing. Dick, overawed, did not dare to move for a moment or two ; then he forced himself to rise and go round the table, and he put his hand on his friend's shoulder.

“Come, come, old man, it isn't so bad as that,” said he. “There must be some other way——”

Summers, as if ashamed of his breakdown, got up and walked to the window ; the night world of London was all afire now, with blue-white and golden stars. When he returned to his chair he said, rather sadly :

“There's no other way, Dick. I've threshed it all out. They'll think I'm off to Australia quite happy and content—glad to get away from a kind of life that never suited me. And what does it matter to me for the short time that can remain ?—whereas they have all their life before them—a long life and happiness. That is my forecast for Nan, Dick. She is naturally a happy creature. And when you come back to England, you'll write out to Australia, and tell me how they are getting on—what kind of house they have—and how Nan's looking—and all the news.”

Dick did not speak for a little while : then he said :

“It's a devilish rough business you've put before you, old chap. A devilish rough business. I did not know there was a man in this country with nerve enough to tackle such a job—considering the extraordinary affection that has always existed between you two. A mighty rough business. Yes, and I rather think you've got me into a tight place. I'm not quite sure, don't you know, what should be my line. If I don't quite see the necessity of this tremendous martyrdom, what ought I to do ? They might hold me responsible—because I did not tell them——”

“You're not going to break faith, Dick ? ” Summers

exclaimed, indignantly. "When I have trusted you? No, no, you won't do that, Dick—give me your word—I know you'll stick to it——"

Erridge hesitated only for a moment.

"There's my hand on it," said he. "You know best. You know best what is necessary. But it's a terrible business. Somehow—somehow I can't help thinking——"

"I tell you it is the only way, Dick," his companion repeated, with a sort of despairing emphasis. "If you only understood the position of affairs. Why, do you know what Nan is resolved on now?—to break off her engagement! She does not know that I know; but I overheard. The chit of a girl!—trying to deceive me!—isn't it wonderful, Dick, the courage she has! Not a word of what she means to do; and when I said to her 'Aren't you troubled about something, Nan?' she said, 'Oh, nothing to speak of'—as if it was some bit of ribbon she had lost, or something gone wrong with her watch. But I knew—I knew. Mrs. Hume asked her if she was prepared to marry into a family that would look down on her father. I wish her answer had not been quite so decisive, you know, Dick——"

"Yes, but what did she say?"

"Oh, she was only too blunt-spoken—she declared she would not——"

"Of course! Well done! I could have guessed that!" cried the other.

"Yes, but you see, Dick," Mr. Summers went on, despondently enough, "that is only another intimation to me to clear out. She cannot be allowed to break off her engagement. It isn't a light thing with her. I've watched her; I know her; I know how sensitive she is; she wouldn't say much—her heart might be breaking—there would be no word. But don't you see how my plan arranges for all this? I quit out—and there's an end of trouble. Those families will be pacified; Nan will have a young husband to take her part and defend her; and if she thinks of me at all——"

"If she thinks of you at all!" Dick interjected.

"If she thinks of me at all, she will say: 'Oh, well, Dodo is having a fine time of it out there in Australia. Plenty of horses and betting there: no chance of his being tired to death, as he was at Crowhurst.'"

"And are you going to tell her you were tired to death at Crowhurst?" asked Dick, regarding him curiously.

"I've hardly made up my mind yet," he answered, with some appearance of effort, "precisely what I'm going to say. It's rather difficult—as you may suppose. But the first plunge will be to-morrow afternoon, when I get down—and that's what I wish was over. The first plunge—and it will be easier after, I dare say; and then when you and I are well away from England, Dick, then, you see, there will be nothing for one to think of but the settled and happy state of affairs that has been left behind. That will be the reward. It will be rather rough, as you say, just before getting off—but afterwards—afterwards there will be makings-up." Then of a sudden he altered his tone. "Come, my good lad, you mustn't let me pester you in this fashion. I've ruined a whole day for you. Let's hear something about yourself. Are you satisfied with your rooms now that you've got them all fixed up?—they seem to me to be very smart."

But Dick was far too seriously occupied with what he had heard to think of turning to his own small surroundings. His thoughts were rather about Crowhurst, and about Nan Summers, and the pathetic sacrifice that was about to be made for her. And then accidentally something was mentioned about the vicarage, and Nan's father was easily led into talking of the girl's earlier years. It was an inexhaustible theme—her pretty ways—her letters—her delight in running races on Clifton Down—a hundred trifles that appeared to him of absorbing interest; and he had talked himself into quite a cheerful humour when he found that it was past midnight and that he must get to his hotel. Dick went down-stairs with his guest, and a hansom was called.

"Very well," said he, "I will come up and breakfast with you at nine; and then we can talk over those cabins and our outfit for the voyage—if all that you say has got to be done."

"And you will stand by me, Dick?" Summers said, earnestly, as the doors of the hansom were being shut.

"You trust me, old chap," was the answer. "You're just the one man in this country I'd stand by, through thick and thin."

But Dick, as he thoughtfully ascended the dark stairs again, said to himself:

"Poor old boy! He has a firm nerve—a nerve as splendid as his splendid physique. But how is he going to make that first plunge to-morrow—with Nan looking at him?"

CHAPTER XX.

FIRST PLUNGE AND LAST.

PERHAPS Sidney Hume had borrowed courage and comfort from his beloved Greeks; perhaps, to suit his present needs and circumstances, he had boldly constructed for himself all sorts of subversive social theories; at all events, as he now strode away out to Crowhurst there was no kind of doubt or hesitation in his manner. And it was a morning to inspire confidence and hope—a morning filled with beautiful things and gracious sounds: the stirring and rustling elms showed arrowy gleams of blue through their topmost branches; here and there the sunlight burned on some strip of golden charlock or on the softened red of poppies among the upland wheat; there was a distant, half-muffled tinkling of sheep-bells; nearer at hand were the voices of children scrambling after wild roses and calling to each other through the hedge. He made sure that on such a day Nan would be out in the garden—the perfect tints of her complexion rendered still more transparent by the surrounding luminous air.

But when he arrived at Crowhurst, and opened the white gate and passed in, she was nowhere visible amid that wide profusion of blooms and colours. He went along to the house, and rang the bell. The little maidservant who appeared looked frightened.

"Mr. Summers has gone up to town, sir," she said.

"Oh, then I will see Miss Anne," he responded, promptly.

Jane faltered for a moment : she sympathised with young lovers—and had no mind for the delivery of cruel messages.

"Miss Anne," she said, with deprecating eyes—"Miss Anne—would rather be excused, sir——"

He stared at her in amazement.

"Why, what is the matter ? She is not ill ?"

"No, sir."

"She is not in her own room ?"

"N—no, sir."

"Oh, but then I must see her," he said. "Go and tell her I must see her. I cannot take any such message except from herself."

The girl hesitated, having no further instructions ; while he, without more ado, stepped into the nearest room, the door of which was open. The next instant he found there was some figure betwixt him and the light : it was Nan—up by the window—and she was regarding him with the strangest apprehension. Nay, she seemed to shrink away from him, to retreat from his quick advance and eager outstretched hands ; and when he would have caught her to him, the more surely to question her eyes, she did not yield to his embrace, she withdrew herself rather, and remained standing before him in the greatest confusion, her looks downcast, her fingers tremulous.

"Nan," said he, utterly stupefied, "what is all this ?"

And then she forced herself to answer. "Sidney," said she, in a low, constrained voice, "why did you—not take my message ? For—for that will be the best thing now—

the best thing for every one—if you stay away—if you never come here again——”

For a second he was too astounded to speak.

“Then you do not love me!” he exclaimed, in accents of bitter reproach. “That is what you have got to say—that is the real message you could not very well leave for me at the door! I understand. It is clear enough. You have changed rather quickly, it is true——”

“Sidney, Sidney,” she cried, “do not talk to me like that! If we have to say good-bye, let it not be that way!”

She managed to raise her eyes to his, and they were full of a piteous longing and appeal; the magnetism of his presence seemed to draw her towards him; the next moment, through some inexplicable impulse, these two had come together, his arms were tightly round her, and he was impetuously kissing her forehead, her eyelids, her lips.

“I love you, Nan. Do you love me?” he was murmuring to her. “For these are the only things that concern us. Everything else is trivial and of no account. My dearest and best, do you love me? Tell me!”

“You know, Sidney,” she made answer, and now her face was hidden in his bosom, and her trembling fingers clung to him. “You know. Why need I tell you? And whatever happens you will never forget what I have confessed to you—promise me that! No, you cannot forget! But it has been all a mistake from the beginning; I can see it; my eyes have been opened. And if we have to part now—well—well—you must promise me, Sidney, that you will never doubt but that I loved you—loved you truly——”

She burst into a fit of crying; and of course he tried to comfort her; but all his soothing and endearing phrases were lost in blank bewilderment. At last he said to her, with gentle firmness:

“Nan, sit down, and tell me distinctly what all this means. What has happened? I know that, whatever it is, it is immaterial; what concerns us is firmly enough established; and perhaps I may not ask you again, though

it sounds so sweet to hear you say it. Now tell me what all this is about."

It was rather a disconnected story she had to tell, of Mrs. Hume's visit, her representations and her challenge, and of her own resolve to remain with her father. Nor was it altogether a tearful tale. If her lips were tremulous they were also proud as she gave him to understand that where her father would be scorned could be no place for her father's daughter. Meanwhile Sidney's face had become overclouded.

"I don't want to quarrel with the Mater," said he. "And you don't want me to quarrel with her, Nan, I am sure. But she is a woman who has been accustomed to have her own way; and she is resolute—and perhaps not over-scrupulous when she is determined to gain her ends; and clearly enough she came out to frighten you with this bogie simply because she has made up her mind I must marry—somebody else. It is a mere bogie, all the same. Why should you, or I, or your father, pay the least heed to what my relatives may be pleased to think of him? We do not ask their opinion. We need not go near them——"

"Ah, but if you were to cut yourself off from your family on my account——" she was beginning to say, sadly enough, when he interrupted her.

"One moment, Nan. Do you imagine I have not taken all these things into consideration? And as for one's family, the duty one is supposed to owe one's family is a very common superstition, but it is a superstition none the less. You may owe duty and gratitude to your father and mother for looking after you when you were young; but in what way are you beholden to a whole lot of kinsfolk who never cared twopence about you? If you choose a friend, you are bound to stick to him—that is right enough; but you never had any choice of your relatives; they were established for you—and that for the most part before you were born. And so, my dearest, my darling Nan, when you and I marry, we will begin and choose our own circle of friends; and those

who are well inclined towards us, we shall welcome ; and those who are ill inclined, they can stay away. Simple, isn't it ? Surely between us you and I can muster up sufficient courage and independence for that ! We don't invite anybody's opinion of you, or of your father, or of our domestic arrangements. When we want advice, we may ask for it, but not till then. And so you see, Nan, you must not be scared by any bogie."

"When I listen to you, Sidney," she said, with grateful eyes, "everything seems so hopeful ; you are so brave ; you put aside things——"

"The things that do not concern us, yes," he said ; and he reached over and took her hand, that lay in her lap, and held it firmly. "For I have told you what is material to us two ; and your eyes—your beautiful eyes—have answered me that you understood, that I could trust you. And you won't be scared by any more bogies ? And you won't send me another such message out to the front door ?——"

Her face became slightly suffused.

"I don't precisely know when my father is coming down from town," she said, "but—but I will write—and tell you."

It was a delicate intimation to him that she would rather not have him call again until her father had returned to Crowhurst ; and perhaps also it suggested that his present visit had lasted long enough. At all events he rose and took his leave—it was a protracted leave-taking, to be sure, for amid all these tender protestations and ineffable love-glances there were still lingering doubts and apprehensions that he had to strive to banish away from that wistful young face—and presently he had left the house and was making for the Oxford Road and the Fair Mile. And if he startled the silence of the lanes and woods by repeating aloud certain of Nan's phrases—'down from town,' and the like—trying to recall the strange fascination of the lengthened diphthong ? But his voice was not so musical as Nan's.

Mr. Summers arrived unexpectedly in the afternoon,

driving out from Henley in an open fly. At the sound of wheels, Nan flew to the door.

"Dodo," she cried, "why did you not let me know you were coming—and I should have driven in to the station to meet you?"

"How could I tell? How could I tell when I should get away?" he said, impatiently, as he turned to settle with the cabman.

"And the sling—you have got rid of it at last!" she said, with joyful and approving eyes. "I am so glad! You are like yourself again!"

"Did you think I was going to wear it for ever?" he asked, in a peevish kind of manner: he did not tell her that for some time back he had worn the unnecessary sling merely as an excuse for lingering about the house and garden, so that she and her lover might go away driving by themselves.

Well, Nan was not used to being spoken to in this dissatisfied, fretful fashion; but she concluded that her father had been tired or worried in town; so she took him by the arm and led him into the dining-room, and placed an easy-chair for him.

"You shall have a cup of tea in two minutes, Dodo," she said.

"I don't want any wish-wash: get me some brandy and soda," he answered her, shortly.

Nor even yet did she show any surprise.

"Oh, yes, yes," she said, and with a blithe air she went away to the sideboard and the cellaret.

Her father's eyes followed her in a curiously furtive way. He seemed to be afraid of her—or of something. And when she turned, he quickly averted his look.

"Yes, you seem a little tired, Dodo," she said, as she brought the things to the table. "But I hope you had a pleasant time in London? Of course you saw Mr. Erridge? And what about his new rooms?"

"Oh, yes, we had a sufficiently pleasant time; something

doing there," he said, in a morose kind of way. "Dick's rooms are in the middle of everything—theatres, music halls; there's some sort of life there—something going on. The fact is, Nan," he proceeded—but singularly enough his eyes were now fixed on the carpet—he never once raised them—and the tumbler she had placed beside him remained untouched, "I must get up a little oftener to London. There's no use fossilising one's self for ever and ever in the country. The country is all very well for some people; but there's others who like a little bit of town thrown in—for the sake of change. And I've been wondering whether Dick couldn't get me a bedroom on that same floor, so that I could run up to it from time to time."

She looked somewhat concerned; but still she said,

"Yes, that would be more convenient for you than going to a hotel, wouldn't it, Dodo?"

"I've been thinking I would put a few things together," he continued—still avoiding her anxious gaze. "A few things in a portmanteau—and I could take the portmanteau up to-morrow, and leave it in Dick's chambers, until he and I could have a look round. A single room would do; but like his own, in the middle of things—where there's some life and stir and amusement going on. I think that will be the best way—and the sooner the better."

He rose, and went out, shutting the door behind him; and she did not attempt to follow. When he got into the garden, he walked along the pathway as if haunted by something; and when he reached the summer-house, and sat down there, he looked back in a watchful and stealthy fashion—and with anguish in his eyes.

"My God, I cannot do it!" he murmured to himself, in a kind of despair. "It is too much—too much to ask of mortal man."

He did not see her again before dinner; he was busy packing his portmanteau. At dinner she seemed chilled in manner, and vaguely apprehensive; and yet she strove to be a cheerful companion as well as she could.

"Where did you dine last night, Dodo?" she asked, pleasantly.

"At the Café de Provence," he answered her.

"I hope they gave you a very nice dinner," she said.

"Oh, I should think so!" he said, with a fine affectation of jollity. "Something like! All kinds of unexpected things—things that tempt you to eat. Oh, yes, very capital it was: bright lights—fine company—plenty of life and go—an excellent dinner: you may trust Dick to find his way about!"

She was silent for a space; then she said, rather piteously—and her fingers, that appeared to have no use for knife or fork, were shaking a little—

"Dodo—I wish—you would sometimes tell me—what things you would like best for dinner. I know I don't do very well—and—and I would like to do better—if you would only tell me—I will try to do better—and not send you away to London——"

In spite of herself tears sprang to her lashes; she quickly left her seat, and crossed the room—her head downcast, her cheeks streaming; and then the door was shut behind her. Nor did he go after her, and pet and pacify her, and bring her back with soothing words and caresses. He remained with his hands clenched on the arms of his chair. There was a hollow and haggard look in his eyes.

Next morning Dick, who had received a telegram, was in his rooms awaiting his friend.

"Dick, my lad," Summers said, as he took the nearest seat handy, and sank rather wearily into it, "this is about killing me. I don't think I can go on with it. It just rives my heart-strings. And to see Nan crying—to see Nan crying—why, her latest fancy is that I want to come to London because the dinners at Crowhurst are not good enough! Dinners! There's many a dinner I've gone without only to get a far-off glimpse of Nan when she was at the vicarage——"

"Look here, old man," said Erridge, "I'm going to ask

you a question—straight from the shoulder. Is all this that you are doing necessary—or absolute foolishness? Mind you, I'm not drawing back; I'm not funkng; if you are off for Australia, I'm with you. But why? Why? If that fellow has an ounce of pluck in him, he'll marry Miss Anne, and tell his fine relatives and friends to go first-class express to the devil. That's what a man would do; perhaps it isn't what a fellow brought up amongst parsons and colleges would do. Why shouldn't he and Nan—Miss Anne, I mean—and you make up a small household together——”

“Dick, man, why do you talk like that?” Mr. Summers interposed, angrily. “Can't I get you to understand? Can't I drive it into your head? A fine thing for a young fellow like that to separate himself from his family, and all because of a love-affair—very fine for a time; but if anything unfortunate happened—look at Nan's responsibility—he would know, and she would know, that she was responsible for cutting him adrift from his own people. Whereas, if she is taken into the family, and made safe and secure by all of them? And that's how it will be, Dick—that's how it will be,” he continued, eagerly. “I've made the first plunge, in a kind of a way; and there isn't much more; soon I shall be out of the road altogether; and Nan will be safe and happy—for she can make friends, the clever creature that she is—yes, yes, she will win them all over to her—and they'll be as proud of her—oh, you will see! And you must let me know, Dick—I shall count upon hearing from you—and you will tell me little things about her—never mind how little, never mind how insignificant, you know: what kind of bonnet she was wearing when you saw her—the colour of her gloves—anything—the smallest trifles—so that I can figure out Nan for myself——”

“Oh, very well,” said Dick, unconcernedly, “if it is to be, it is. And I've been hurrying things along. Ran down to Tilbury to look over the ship: a ripper, I can tell you!—the saloon as swell as the *Troc.* or the *Empire*—

golden gods and goddesses, as large as life, perched up in the air——” He paused for a second. “I say, I hope they’re pretty securely fixed. If there was a bit of a sea on, and if one of those golden goddesses were to come flying out of the clouds and hit you on the head, she’d just about bounce you into kingdom come.” Then he took up a piece of paper. “See here : I’ve been counting out what dress shirts and chokers I shall want—rather a tall order, ain’t it ! What a nuisance it is there’s no washing done on board ! And how I’m going to stow away all those shirts——”

“But you’re not going to dress for dinner every evening ?” his companion asked.

“What else ?” responded Dick, with wide eyes. “What else ? I don’t want to be taken for a bagman out on a spree. There’ll be dances and concerts : you can’t ask a girl for a dance—you can’t escort a lady up to the piano—if you’ve a cut-away coat on. Might as well wear a billycock. Why, man, I’m taking three dress suits with me : do you think I’d trust a Kangaroo tailor ? Besides, there’s sure to be some officers’ wives on board ; and they know a thing or two ; they have got eyes ; and at least I’m going to pay them the compliment of grooming myself well.”

“Did you say I could join the Plymouth express at Reading ?” Mr. Summers inquired, in almost a listless fashion.

“As far as I can make out from Bradshaw,” his friend answered. “But I will get to know for certain.”

“I’m not going down to Crowhurst again, Dick,” the other said, “until the day before we leave. I can’t bear it. You don’t know what it is to me to see Nan with tears in her eyes—it’s no use—I can’t stand it—I’d own up the whole thing—and ruin all her chances of happiness through a moment’s weakness. And it’s terrible to find Nan looking frightened—frightened of me, Dick !—Nan, frightened of me ! But it will soon be over now,” he added, rising, as if to thrust off some weight that was choking him, “it will soon be all over—and the way left clear for everybody. Well, what are your plans meantime ?”

"At present," said Dick, also rising, "I'm going to take you down with me to Cornhill, to see about the things you'll need for the voyage. I've been making inquiries—and I can tell you we shall want all the little tricks and dodges. If what I hear is true, the Red Sea just now will be a very good imitation of Tophet with the cold tap shut off."

So these two went out into the roaring world of London: here at least, for one of them, was a mechanical duty, that could be easily faced—nay, that could be faced with some sense of relief.

Late one night Mr. Summers was alone in the dining-room at Crowhurst, and he was writing a letter. Or rather he was about to write it; for although there were the materials on the table, and although he had sat himself down once or twice, he could not bring himself to begin. He would get up again, with a heavy sigh; and would pace to and fro, his open palms pressed on his chest, as if there were some deep-seated pain there. But at length he resolutely attacked that sheet of paper.

"Dear Nan," he wrote, in his stiff and laboured hand—carefully dotting every *i* and crossing every *t* as he went along, though his fingers shook not a little. "The truth must out at last. I'm sick-tired of Crowhurst. There's no use pretending any longer. I've had enough——"

The pen dropped from his hand; he rose, and began pacing up and down the room again.

"God help me," he groaned to himself, "will Nan believe that! But she must believe it—she must believe it!"

He went back, and took up his pen.

"There is no blame to any one. But I told you all along that Crowhurst was only an experiment; and now that it has been tried, it is a complete failure—as far as I am concerned. It isn't the kind of life that suits me, however much I may have been making believe. And so I'm off. And I'm off for good, too, never to return to

England. It's the only way. You've been brought up different, you see, Nan ; and I wanted you to make your own set of friends ; and that's all right ; I'm leaving you quite free—and I am sure you will be happy. Only you must not bother about me. I'm off to the other side of the world, where there's something going on that I'm better familiar with than the life we've been living here ; and I'm not coming back—nothing would tempt me to come back. So it's no good your writing, or advertising, or anything of that kind. You go your own road ; you'll find plenty of friends of your own way of upbringing ; and I'm going mine—there will be some of my old pals out there, I dare say. And I don't wish to be inquired about ; I forbid it ; and as your father I have the right to forbid it. You'd better go at once to Mr. Morris ; you will find that I have left him full instructions ; he will look after you, until you get married ; and then you can tell him whether you want to remain at Crowhurst, or to sell the place. I've had to take a lump sum with me—not very much, but I think it will last my time—and I wouldn't have done that only I want no means of communication left open. I'm off for good and all ; and your best plan is to forget that I ever existed——”

For a moment or two the laboured writing ceased ; and he sank back in his chair. Then he forced himself to continue :

“—and you will be happy with your young husband. And you must remember that his relatives will then be your relatives ; and you must make yourself agreeable to them ; and you must show a little gratitude to those who are kind to you ; and they are sure to be so. I think that is all. I should like to have said good-bye ; but it would have been painful ; and you might have tried to interfere and put me off—whereas my plans are *fixed*, and I *rely upon you to respect them*. So I will say good-bye on paper, Nan ; and I wish you, my dear lass, every joy and happiness through a long life—indeed, indeed I do.

“YOUR LOVING FATHER.”

He started : there was some slight creak. What if Nan herself were to appear—at the open door—challenging him, defying him to go until he had confessed the truth ? But he listened intently, and there was nothing further : it had been merely one of those nameless sounds that haunt the stillness of a house at night. He folded the sheet of paper, and put it in an envelope, and addressed it ; and then, with a long and lingering look round—for there were many memories attaching to this room, and he was leaving it for ever—he took up the letter, and extinguished the lamp, and passed into the hall. Here a candle was burning ; he carried that with him as he stealthily ascended the stairs.

And yet he need not have been so cautious in his movements, for Nan was accustomed to hear his footsteps about the house, and around the house too, at late hours, in his capacity of ‘bull-dog.’ Nevertheless, it was as a thief that he stole by her room and entered his own ; and noiselessly and with extremest care did he pull out a drawer, to take therefrom an oblong wooden box, which apparently he was about to place in a hand-bag that stood on the dressing-table. But first he opened and glanced into the box, to see that his treasures were safe. They were simple things. Two packets of letters, each one of them carefully marked ‘From Nan,’ with the date attached ; some envelopes containing scraps of autumn foliage ; photographs of Nan at different stages of her school-girl life ; and similar keepsakes and souvenirs. Trifling things : but it was a lover’s casket that he put into that small hand-bag.

And then he was ready to come away ; and as stealthily he left the room, and stepped along the narrow landing. But he could not pass Nan’s door. He could not pass Nan’s door without pausing to bid her some kind of mute, despairing farewell. And he held his breath tightly, so that she could hear no sound of the sobbing that shook his powerful frame. His eyes were piteous ; and the hot tears coursing down his cheeks told of his agony of suffering ; but Nan was all unaware. For her, sweet sleep and happy dreams :

for him, the lone night—and wide seas—and distant ways. “Nan,” he could have cried to her, “is the letter too cruel? But it had to be, my lass, it had to be!”

He stole downstairs. He put the candle on the hall table, and went forward to open the front door. But when he returned, to blow out the light, he found accidentally lying there a lace scarf that Nan sometimes threw round her head and neck when he and she went for an evening stroll. And perhaps some recollection of these placid evening rambles overcame him; with both hands he caught up this bit of finery, and pressed it to his lips, and passionately kissed it again and again; and now Nan might well have heard the violence of his sobbing, but that she was far away in the vague realms of sleep. Then, with uncertain footsteps, he went out into the white moonlit world; he passed along the path; at the gate he stopped for one long last look—murmuring under his breath ‘Good-bye, Nan—good-bye, my brave lass—and God bless you!’ When he turned away he knew that the first plunge and the last had been taken: it was all over now.

Some five hundred yards distant—down towards the Oxford Road—and by the side of a dark beechwood, a waggohette was waiting, the lamps, which were almost unnecessary on such a night, bringing out the horses’ necks and heads into bold relief.

“Here I am, Dick,” Mr. Summers said, and he got up beside his friend.

They drove away in absolute silence. For though Dick Erridge was a fool, he was not fool enough to try to say anything to this man, who had as it were come through the valley of the shadow of death.

CHAPTER XXI.

A GULF BETWEEN.

It was a brilliant morning, fresh, and clear, and sweet-scented ; and Nan came downstairs singing—a gay air—‘The British Grenadiers’ it was—though she did not pay much attention to the words.

“Dodo,” she called aloud in the empty passage, “where are you ? ”

There was no response ; so in the same heedless manner she went along and entered the dining-room, where breakfast was laid. There was a letter on the table ; and at a glance she recognised the handwriting.

“A letter from Dodo ? ” she said to herself ; and she took it up curiously ; and did not open it at once. It was an unusual kind of thing. But he had not been quite himself of late : perhaps this was some explanation—or even some bit of shy apology for unintentional brusqueness—some appeal for a re-establishment of the old familiar and affectionate terms.

At last she tore open the envelope, and unfolded the sheets of paper. The very first words that met her eyes were like a blow ; she became ghastly pale ; and before she had got to the end of those cramped and formal lines she was shivering from head to foot. She could not comprehend it all at once—could not believe, perhaps, that any such terrible thing was possible ; but through the midst of this sudden stupor of bewilderment came the one wild, desperate hope that even yet she might be able to find her father, and fall at his feet, and clasp his knees, and implore him not to go away from her. Breathless, benumbed as she was, she managed to get quickly to the open door.

“Jane !—Jane ! ” she called—and there was something in that shrill and piteous cry that brought the frightened maidservant instantly to her. “Where is my father ? When

did he leave ? What did he say ? Did he give you this letter ?——”

“But I haven’t seen the master at all this morning, Miss Anne,” the girl said. “I thought he hadn’t come down——”

At this Nan hurried by her and rushed upstairs—to her father’s room. It was empty. The bed had not been slept in ; there was no sign of any hurried departure. All this had been planned, then ?—and Dodo was gone.

Slowly, mechanically, as one in a dream, she descended the stairs again, and went into the dining-room, and sate down on the couch by the window : she was trembling, and chilled, and tearless. The letter still lay on the table : she stared at it—as if she were staring into some unknown future, not yet realising all that it meant. The little maidservant, after a few moments of hesitation, ventured to follow her young mistress into the room.

“I hope there’s nothing wrong, Miss Anne ?” she timidly asked.

“Nothing that you could understand, Jane,” was the answer. And then she went on, in a dejection of despair that was more heartrending than any violent outburst of grief : “My father has flung me away from him—that is all. He has cast me away. And he is never coming back to Crowhurst any more : it is all a wreck and ruin now.”

“Nay, don’t say that, Miss Anne !” the girl pleaded, with quick sympathy. “It can’t be so bad as that. If you’ll tell me where to find him, I’ll go and fetch him back : the master won’t need much pressing to come back to you, Miss Anne—that I’m certain-sure of !”

“He will never come back—never—never,” she said, in the same strangely unimpassioned way. And then she continued—for here at least, in the new and appalling loneliness that now surrounded her, was a human being who could pity her, if that was all : “I—I do not know what has happened—I cannot tell yet. . . . If I had guessed that he was dis-

satisfied, that he was thinking of going away, I might have asked him what was wrong. . . . But I was blind—I did not see—I did not see—and he must have been hiding something from me. . . . And now—now there is an end. If only he had said there was some time I could look forward to, I should not have cared—I should have waited and watched—perhaps hoping he might come a little sooner—out of kindness and forgiveness. But there's nothing of that sort possible now; and I shall never see him again—though I waited and hoped through months and years—the long, long, empty years!” She turned aside, and laid her arms on the cushion, and bowed down her head. “Go away now, Jane,” she said, wearily. “I want to think. I want to think what I have to do now—since he has cast me off—and left me.”

Jane stood uncertain—distracted between obedience and commiseration.

“But I must bring you your breakfast, Miss Anne——”

“I don't want any—I want to be alone,” the girl said.

“A cup of tea, then——”

“I only want to be alone, Jane—leave me, Jane—leave me—I must be alone.”

And Jane went away; but it was with a sense of responsibility that drove her to speedy action. She did not understand what had happened; but she could not have her mistress left in this condition; she would call in the aid of wiser counsel than her own. And to whom should she instinctively turn but to the young lover: surely it was his place to appear, with succour in time of need? She asked for no permission, no authority. She went straightway to the boy-groom, and told him that he must at once get the phaeton ready, and drive in to Henley, and bring out Mr. Hume; and she called for old John the gardener to help. She would have sent a note, of urgent entreaty; but Jane was not good at penmanship, nor even at the expression of thoughts that were clear enough in her own mind: failing that course, she entrusted the lad with a message which she

thought would have sufficient weight. As if it wanted much to bring Sidney Hume out to Crowhurst !

And in an incredibly short space of time the phaeton had sped on its errand and returned, bringing the young man ; and here was Jane awaiting him, in the passage, and silently pointing to the dining-room door. He tapped gently. There was no reply. Then he made bold to enter : Nan was still lying on the couch, her face hidden. But when she heard some one come into the room, she raised her head ; she saw who this was ; she sprang to her feet, and advanced towards him, and threw herself into his arms whilst she burst into a fit of wild, ungovernable weeping.

“ Sidney, Sidney, have you come to me in my disgrace ! ” she cried, amid her choking sobs. And she continued, quite incoherently : “ Don’t you know that I am a castaway—that he has flung me from him—and left me. You should not have come here, Sidney—I am disgraced—I am a castaway—you should not come near one that is disgraced. I was too proud and too happy—but I have been stricken down—and it’s Dodo—it’s Dodo—that has struck me—and the blow—is hard——”

Nay, she could not proceed, through the vehemence of her distress ; and in vain he tried to stem this torrent of emotion that had been too long pent up, and now sought natural relief.

“ My dearest, do you mean to say your father would do anything to hurt or harm you ?—no, no, that is not believable ! ” he remonstrated ; and he drew her head still closer to him, and smoothed the soft golden-brown hair, and endeavoured to still that frantic sobbing.

She disengaged herself—she took up the letter from the table.

“ Read it,” she said, “ and then—then leave me, Sidney—you need not come near a castaway—a castaway ! ”—and therewith she returned to the couch again, and buried her face in the cushion : she seemed completely overwhelmed in her misery—and careless as to what might happen now.

He read the letter—slowly, and not without amazement ; and then he went over to her, and put his hand on her shoulder—the prostrate figure was all trembling and quivering.

“Nan, listen to me,” he said, bending down to her. “I don’t believe half of what is in this letter. It is quite possible he may have been a bit tired, and restless, and longing for a change ; but I know what he will tire of soonest of all, and that is being away from you. You’ll find him coming back to you——”

“Never, never !” she moaned—and it was with difficulty he could make out her broken sentences. “I know better than that—I know why he *struck* me—it was to make sure I should not seek to get him back—it was—it was to tell me I was cast off for good and all. Sidney, what could I have done that was so wrong ?—what should I have done otherwise ? I wanted him to bring his old friends and companions to the house. I wanted him to go oftener up to London, for amusement. I offered to go to race-meetings with him. I did—what I could ! . . . Oh, no,—oh, no !” she cried in another passion of tears. “I did not. I was too happy—too selfish. I did not notice that he was dissatisfied. When I came to Crowhurst—it was all a wonder to me—I thought it was to last for ever—I never thought that Dodo would—would fling me away from him——” But here her utterance was quite choked with sobs—in total abandonment of despair.

He was in great perplexity. He went and read the letter again. Then he returned to her.

“Nan,” said he, gently, “you must not give way like this. Something has to be done. I suppose the Mr. Morris mentioned in the letter is your father’s lawyer : now would you like me to go up to town and see him, and make inquiries, and get the latest information ?——”

“Yes—yes,” she answered him.

“And there’s another thing, Nan,” he went on. “You cannot live here by yourself—the loneliness would kill you.

And yet it is hard to say off-hand what had best be done. Now there is a very dear friend of mine—the sister of a former college-chum—and about the best and nicest woman in the world : may I bring her out to stay with you for a few days until we can arrange something ? I know she will come ; she is always ready to help any one in distress—it's a kind of profession she has, and they seem to keep her pretty well employed. May I bring her out to you, Nan ? ”

“ Whatever you think right, Sidney,” she murmured—the tempest of her grief was dying down, leaving her wholly exhausted.

“ Well, I'll go now,” he said. “ Mind you keep up your heart. Your father's daughter ought to have courage.”

He stooped and kissed her cheek and said good-bye ; then he went and found Jane, and gave her a lot of instructions about her young mistress ; and finally, discovering that the phaeton was still standing there, in case it might be wanted, he got the lad to drive him forthwith into Henley. Mr. Morris's address he had written down on the back of an envelope.

But mid-day trains between Henley and London are few ; and it was not until the afternoon that he reached the lawyer's office. Mr. Morris easily recognised the position of this emissary, of whom, indeed, he had heard ; and spoke to him freely enough—especially about the careful fashion in which Mr. Summers had regulated all his affairs before leaving the country ; yet on the one point on which he most wanted information, Sidney could find none at all.

“ I vaguely gathered from him,” the lawyer said, “ that he meant to sail from Plymouth this morning ; and I guessed his destination to be Australia. That you could easily find out, at the offices of the steamship companies—unless he booked his passage under an assumed name ; and that is not likely. But,” continued this small, suave, sandy-haired man, regarding Sidney with a peculiar look of scrutiny, “ I understood from him that he meant to leave strict injunctions

there should be no inquiries made—no attempt to discover his whereabouts——”

“That is so—that is so,” said Sidney, with downcast eyes. “I have read his letter to his daughter. It is rather hard and blunt—perhaps partly by intention, if he wanted to forbid her trying to follow him. I don’t understand it quite. He was excessively fond of her—an affection I have never seen equalled ; and he might have bade her good-bye in rather more kindly terms ; he might have concealed a little of his impatience with the life at Crowhurst—unless, indeed, that was his motive, to prevent any possible renewal of their old relations. If that was his intention, he has succeeded. She is humbled to the ground ; considers herself a castaway—disgraced and despised ; she even talks of his having struck her, but I am sure that was not in his mind. I am sure that could not be in his mind : I have seen those two together. I think he would have cut off his left hand to save her the scratch of a pin. And naturally she wasn’t prepared ; that is why she shrinks as if under a blow ; I don’t think he could have meant it to be quite so hard.” He was silent for a little while. “So that is all you have to tell me ?”

“That is all I can tell you of Mr. Summers,” the lawyer said. “But there is much about his business affairs that I should like to lay before Miss Summers, any day she happens to be in town. I should like her to know precisely how she stands ; and then she could tell me whether she would prefer that the one or two mortgages I hold, and the securities at Mr. Summers’s bankers, should remain where they are—to save her trouble.”

“Yes,” said the young man, absently, as he rose to take his leave. “She will call on you, no doubt ; but I fear it will be a little while before she can bring herself to think of such things.”

And then he went off to Wygram Street, Russell Square, to seek out his friends Stephen and Constance Weguelin. Stephen had been a college friend and close companion of

his, but had now drifted into journalism, and was engaged on one of the great morning papers ; Constance, in the intervals of household duties, also wrote—for magazines and the like—but mostly her leisure was devoted to work of a more practical and beneficent kind. Constance he found in the drawing-room, which was somewhat dingy in the pale mist of Bloomsbury ; Stephen was upstairs in his study, forging thunderbolts.

This rather elderly, rather plain-featured woman, with the gracious smile and tender eyes, granted his prayer at once, the moment she had heard his story.

“ Yes, indeed, Sidney,” said she (for they were on very intimate terms), “ I will go with the greatest pleasure ; but don’t you think it would be rather late by the time we should reach there to-night ? Why not stay and dine with us ; and we can put you up in a way ; and I will go down with you to-morrow morning. It is quite a long time since we had a chat—and it is only through Stephen that I have heard from time to time of your Dionysiac book.”

He could hardly press her for greater haste ; he accepted. And when everything had been explained and arranged about Nan and Crowhurst, he naturally turned to other topics.

“ Has Stephen got accustomed yet to wielding these tremendous powers ? ” he asked.

“ Oh, as for that,” she answered, laughing, “ Stephen is only mortal : he is not omnipotent. There’s a good deal of difference, sometimes, between what a leader-writer would like to say and what he is allowed to say. And that space I call the debateable land ; I am allowed occasionally to wander there, and listen. I listen to the leaders that don’t appear——”

“ It is very kind of you.”

“ I can assure you they are ever so much more amusing than those that do. Poor Stephen !—yesterday it was one of those perpetual Irish subjects ; and he was angry ; and he began ‘ Even in the cradle the first articulate cry of an

Irish child is for a Government grant.' But you didn't see that this morning, did you? That was lost in the debatable land. Well, whether he has to trim his sails or not, I think Stephen's political writing is far and away the most brilliant that is appearing in any of the papers. I recognise him in a moment—even if he has been late at the office—and I don't know the subject when I open the paper——"

But here the object of this eulogy—a slight, stooping, tallish young man, with a bloodless face, teeth prominent when he smiled, and pleasant grey eyes—came into the room, and the conversation had to be changed.

It proved to be on the whole a most cheerful evening; for the present crisis in Sidney's life, as hardly a subject for general talk, was put aside by tacit acquiescence; and at dinner—a simple meal—they found plenty of other things to discourse about: old college friends and their doings and driftings, new books and literary rumours, and more especially a voyage to the Greek Archipelago from which the Weguelins had recently returned. It was a treat given to Constance by this younger brother of hers; and she had come back overbrimming with gratitude, and wild with enthusiasm over everything connected with the sea and ships.

"After dinner, Sidney," said her brother, with a laugh, "Constance must show you her cabin. Do you know what the maniac has done?—turned her room into a cabin—everything complete—upper and lower berths, circular wash-stand fixed to the wall, racks for bottles and tumblers—a swinging lantern—two port-holes instead of a window—as like the real thing as ever you saw. And in the morning I hear her call to the maid who brings her her cup of tea—'Where are we this morning, Susan?' and the answer is sometimes 'Just off Cape Matapan, miss,' or 'Within sight of Crete, miss,' or 'Getting close to Malta now, miss.' Constance has given her a chart, with perfect liberty; and the reckless way the creature skips and bounds about is beautiful: one morning she will announce 'The Gulf of Ægina, miss'—she hasn't been taught to say

‘Hyegghina’—rather too difficult for the Cockney larynx—and twenty-four hours after it will be ‘Cape St. Vincent, miss!’——”

“What a mournful disillusion,” Sidney said, “to open your eyes and find the port-holes looking out on a lot of Bloomsbury houses.”

“But I don’t,” she responded gallantly. “That is precisely what doesn’t happen. For I sleep in the lower berth, and when I waken in the morning and look up, the ports are simply circles of sky; and sometimes, you know, there is a tinge of blue—and then you can be just wherever you want to be. I was sailing past Troy this morning—Troy, and the long, yellow shores, and the tiny wind-mills.”

There seemed to be no end to her reminiscences and experiences; and these appeared to have been all enjoyable; and all accredited to this paragon of a brother. Even the next morning, as she and Sidney were on their way to Crowhurst, she occasionally reverted to this wonderful voyage, entertaining him with sharp and shrewd little character-sketches of her shipmates. But as they drew near to the end of their journey, she grew more grave. It was a delicate mission on which she was bent; and she knew not what reception might be accorded her.

Jane met them at the door.

“I am so glad you are come, sir,” she said, anxiously. “I can’t do anything with Miss Anne——”

“Where is she?”

“Upstairs, sir, in her own room. But she has not undressed. She is lying on the bed—and all the night through moaning—I went to her two or three times—but it was no use—and she won’t take anything——”

“Constance, will you go to her at once?” he said.

“By myself?”

“Yes. She knows you are coming. And you will find her easy to get on with: she is sensitive to kindness.”

She went away upstairs, accompanied by the little maid:

he turned into the adjacent drawing-room. And there he remained for some twenty minutes, perhaps thirty : to him it seemed hours. Then Constance Weguelin came downstairs again.

"I have persuaded her to go to bed," she said. "That is the best place for her. She is a little feverish—no wonder, for she is completely exhausted with her long fasting and her lying awake all night. And she has promised to take something : I hope after that she may fall into a sound sleep. But she will hardly speak of herself. All her anxiety is that you and I should be properly looked after—I mean about food things !—weak and helpless as she is, she sent for Jane twice, to give her further and further directions : isn't that strange ?"

"No," said Sidney, without explanation. "I understand."

But the slight feverishness did not yield to these remedial and precautionary measures : the girl could not swallow anything—confessed to a raking headache—had fits of shivering, followed by flushes of heat—while her languor and weakness seemed to increase as the hours went by. Early in the afternoon Constance came down again.

"There's nothing to be alarmed about, Sidney," she said ; "but I think you ought to send for a doctor."

He himself drove in to Henley, and brought the doctor out with him. The result of the first examination did not sound so very serious.

"A little feverish, yes. And the temperature rather high, and the pulse, too. A sound night's rest would do her a world of good. But I will come out again in the evening."

In the evening he looked somewhat more concerned. The temperature had distinctly risen ; the alternate fits of shivering and flushes of heat were more pronounced ; and her eyes, when she opened them in answer to some whispered question, had at times a curiously furtive and restless look in them. But mostly she tried to hide away

from the light—moaning slightly, perhaps from the pain of the headache, perhaps from mere exhaustion ; and now she had quite forgotten her anxieties as house-mistress—Jane was no longer summoned to attend to the visitors.

Constance remained up all that night, in the sick-room. Sidney, also, had no thought of sleep : he wandered about—sometimes outside, with noiseless footfall. And where was ‘Nan’s bull-dog’ now, he might have asked. But this was an insidious enemy that had slipped by and attacked her, and was like to gain complete possession of her. For with the new day there could be no longer any doubt : she had become the prey of a violent fever, induced by a distraught mind ; and the enfeebled frame given over to this consuming fire seemed to grow weaker and weaker, as time went on, until a nameless dread had crept into the atmosphere of this house, and brave assurances were given the one to the other with a sinking heart.

She spoke to no one, and could scarcely be brought to answer a question. Sometimes, however, she would mutter to herself, in low and panting accents ; and when they tried to listen, they found that this troubled self-communion was about inconsequent things ; she was delirious—though not vehemently so. But one night—as the fever was drawing near to its crisis—her eyes seemed unusually restless and also unnaturally bright ; and although her breath came and went with difficulty, they could make out something of her incoherent talk.

“Dodo,” she was saying in that hurried, panting way—and she did not appear to know who were in the room with her—“Dodo—you struck too hard !—you struck too hard ! If I—had been as strong as you—I would have been more merciful to you—I would have hidden a little—I would not have told you that I was so tired of Crowhurst. And—and I know there were many faults—I was not doing very well—but you cannot always get what you want—in Henley. And I was glad you went to the Café de Provence—I was not jealous—and if you had told me more about

what you liked, I would—have tried to do a little better. But perhaps you did not mean it all, Dodo!—perhaps you did not quite mean it all!—perhaps it was to keep me—from following you—or asking you to come back. And I will obey you. You shall not have to complain of me again—there was plenty—to complain of before—only, we were all so happy—Sidney and you and I—and I forgot—and then you grew tired. But there will be no more complaint—I will try to do better—yes, yes, to do better—and Dodo will not grow tired—I will go up to the Café—and—and ask them to show me——” Of a sudden she made an effort to raise herself, and her eyes were wild. “Dodo,” she cried, pitifully, “come back to me!—come back to Nan! Don’t you know me? I am Nan! I am Nan—that you used to come to see at the Vicarage—don’t you remember—the Bristol days? Dodo—it’s Nan that’s calling you!——”

But here was Constance, with her gentle persuasion, her soothing words, and cool fingers for the burning and aching forehead; and in a space of time all was still again in the room.

It was on this same night that a great steamer was thundering on its course through the moonlit waters of the Mediterranean. There was quite a gay scene on board; for the quarter-deck had been cleared, coloured lamps hung about, a piano brought from the saloon, while ladies and gentlemen—Dick Erridge conspicuously active amongst them—were taking their places for the Lancers. But there was one man who was not of that throng. He remained right away aft; his looks directed to the seething line in wake of the ship, that was the intangible and fanciful connection between himself and certain far-off and ever-receding shores.

“Are they looking after you, Nan,” he was saying to himself, “—looking well after you, and taking care of you? They’ll have to do that now. And no doubt they will—no doubt they will; for you’re a clever kind of creature at

making friends ; they'll come round you, and pet you, and make much of you ; and all will go well and happily. And in time you'll forget all about that letter ; and if you should ever look back and think about the early days at Crowhurst—Ah, but you'd better not look back. You must look forward. Your life must all be with your young husband now."

There was a sudden noise behind him. He turned, with his grave and sad eyes, to see what was going on. The Lancers had begun.

CHAPTER XXII.

AVILION.

BENEFICENT sleep, a sound constitution, and assiduous nursing pulled her through ; she came back from those dim and drear ways to the white wonder of the living world ; and now through their joyfuller forecasts there ran mysterious references to some place called Avilion.

"Avilion?" repeated Nan, as she lay half-dreaming and half-looking out upon the coloured splendours of the garden. "What do you mean, Constance?"

"That is Stephen's fanciful name for it," was the answer.

"In reality it is a small house in a terrace fronting the sea at Worthing. Yet what do you think of that as a present, my dear? A ten-roomed house, completely furnished in a plain and simple way—and that was what an excellent old lady handed over to me some eight or nine years ago—in a freak of quite ridiculous generosity. But a most useful gift it has proved ever since," Constance continued, in cheerful and gentle tones soothing to an invalid's ear ; "for, you see, Stephen and I have to consider ways and means ; *we* don't belong to the folk who can scorn journalism and go and live among the ancient Greeks ; and so, to pay the rates and taxes, and the wages of the housekeeper and maid, we let No. 14, Cranberry Terrace, for three months in the summer ; and the rest of the year we turn it into a kind of

convalescent home if any of our friends want to run down for a pulling together ; or Stephen and I may take a few days now and again, if he has been working too hard. Hence, Avilion. We send people there to cure them of their grievous wounds ; and we are going to take you there as soon as you can be removed : No. 14 will be empty in a week's time now. Unfortunately Stephen won't be able to come down much ; his busiest time is just beginning ; that is, when the other writers are away for their holidays, and the paper is rather short-handed, then he gets more to do than he knows how to deal with—leaders, articles, reviews—it is a fine time for him—so that he never goes away for an autumn holiday ; but at least he could run down by the last train on Friday night and go up again on the Sunday afternoon. If it were only the real Avilion we were taking you to—‘where falls not hail, or rain, or any snow’—but as it is, dear Nan, you must simply put up with Worthing, and your chances.”

“How can I thank you for all your goodness to me !” the girl murmured.

“Oh, by the way,” Constance interposed, “there is one thing we have forgotten. We have left Sidney out ! What is to become of Sidney ? The programme is all very fine ; and I shouldn't be surprised if you rather liked No. 14—it's quite a cheerful little place ; but at the same time don't you think it would be rather shabby to leave Sidney out ? Don't you think, just for old sake's sake, he ought to be included ? And my idea is that he should bring his books down, and take rooms at an hotel—I know an exceedingly quiet one in West Worthing ; and then on wet days he would have some resource ; and on fine days he would go driving with us—Bramber, and Steyning, and Arundel——” There was a sound outside. “What's that ?—the phaeton ? Oh, then he'll be here directly ; and you just ask him, Nan, what he has to say to this proposal. I think the quartet of us might have some happy evenings down there—in Avilion.” And therewith she slipped away from the room ; for she heard

his footstep on the stair ; and she wished to leave the two lovers alone for a while.

When Sidney came in, he was untying a small package.

“ I wonder if this is what you want, Nan,” he said. “ It is rather difficult getting a pocket-atlas that is minute ; but at least this one has the Australian colonies on different maps——”

He turned to the proper pages, and handed her the open book ; and for a space she seemed totally oblivious of his presence, so curiously did her eyes dwell on these indented coast-lines, with their closely-printed names of bays and capes and towns. It was a volume that an invalid could hold easily ; perhaps she wanted it for moments of loneliness—for musing—for the imaginative study of a wanderer’s whereabouts and his doings. Yet these great continents—Queensland—New South Wales—Victoria—seemed altogether voiceless and remote ; and wide indeed were the waters that closed them round.

“ You are not thinking, Nan,” said he, timidly, “ of going away out there, when you are quite strong again ? ”

She summoned herself back.

“ Oh, no—oh, no,” she said, in a hopeless kind of way. “ He has forbidden it—even if there was a chance of my finding him. And when I know what he wants, I can but obey. What went wrong here at Crowhurst, was all through my not knowing. If I had suspected he was growing tired of me, and of the life here——”

“ He never was tired of you ! ” Sidney broke in, bluntly. “ Don’t you believe that. It is not believable. If he were to say so in twenty letters, I would not believe it. No doubt he had his own reasons for going away—and when in course of time he comes back——”

“ He will not come back—he will never come back ! ” she said piteously. “ Do you think he would have flung me away as one useless and disgraced if he had meant ever to come back ? ” She lay silent for a second or two. “ Sidney, when you next go up to town, I wish you would

call on Mr. Morris, and ask him what sum it was that my father took away with him."

"Nan," he exclaimed, "I could not do that! Lawyers don't talk about such things to third persons. I could not ask him such a question unless he knew it was with your authority——"

Then 'rosy-red grew she,' through all the pallor left by her recent illness.

"But surely he understands——"

"Yes, I dare say he understands that in the good time coming I shall have to take over the control of all your affairs——"

"And why not now, Sidney—why not now?" she pleaded. "I will give you all the authority, if Mr. Morris will tell me what steps to take. And you must settle whether Crowhurst is to be sold or not; my father did not say which way he wished; I have nothing to guide me. Only, if he were ever to come back to England, he would not seek to return here; and I am anxious to get away from it—well, of course—I cannot bear to remain in the place where I—where I—disappointed—Dodo. I keep wondering and guessing where I failed—I keep recalling things—and reproaching myself for having driven him from his home: Sidney—Sidney—you must take me away from Crowhurst!—I will go with you anywhere—to Worthing, as Constance says—anywhere—but here everything I see around me is an accusation—and from morning till night I know that I am—that I am disgraced——"

She was weak, and sensitive through weakness; she turned aside her head, and put her arm across her face, and sobbed. He sought to quiet and soothe her; and then, by way of distraction, he asked her what she meant about the sum of money her father had taken with him.

"Because," said she, with considerable effort, "because—if it was not a large sum—then Dodo might have to come back. Only he was so sparing about anything for himself. All his extravagance was for me. And then—then there's

another thing I have been thinking of : if his money were to run short—and he was determined never to come back to England—yet leaving me here with everything——” Of a sudden she regarded him with anxious solicitude, and she spoke with unwonted energy : “ Sidney, you must have Mr. Morris come down here at once. You shall have all the authority that is necessary. And you must sell Crowhurst ; and you must advertise for my father in the Australian papers, and tell him that a sum of money is awaiting him—surely that is a small favour to ask of him—he could not refuse me that—he may have been angry and disappointed with me—and concealing how much he was so—but at least he could not refuse me so much as a favour——” And then she sank back languidly on the pillow again. “ No. It is hopeless. I forgot. I must obey. There is to be no inquiry—no advertising : Dodo is gone away from me, just as if he were dead.”

“ Don’t be too sure, Nan,” her lover would keep repeating to her. “ Strange things happen. And the first thing for you is to get strong and well : that is what your father would say to you if he were here.”

Then in due course came the longed-for transference to No. 14 ; and quite a light-hearted little party those young people formed as the train sped away down through Surrey and Sussex. The morning was wild and gusty ; but there were occasional bursts of sunlight as well ; through the streaming window-panes they could see the wide landscape shimmering in gold from time to time. But it was with themselves they were mostly concerned ; there were all kinds of eager and happy plans and forecasts ; literary projects, too, some of them not of the sanest. Stephen Weguelin insisted that his first duty to the spirit of the age, his sacred duty, would be to write an article protesting against the monstrous injustice of withholding the franchise from the inmates of lunatic asylums. Constance, on the other hand, had in mind a paper for some woman’s magazine—a paper which she declared would capture the hearts of all mothers

everywhere. She had heard of some juvenile romancist, aged nine or so, who had been giving an account of how she had taken her doll to be photographed; how Dolly had fallen asleep in the cab and woke up cross; how she had yawned, and objected to having her dress tidied; how she had looked frightened when they put her in the chair; how the photographer had complimented her on being the very steadiest sitter he ever had; how, when Dolly was asked to assume a pleasant expression, she had smiled so sweetly——

“What a disgraceful little liar!” Sidney broke in.

“Not at all!” said Constance, indignantly. “Simply imagination. And when you get heaps of it, as in Milton, then you call it genius. It is bulk that impresses people. The small thief who picks your pocket is a wretched creature; but the big thieves, the Drakes and Clives, are splendid fellows and heroes. I don’t call it lying; I call it imagination; and every child has its share. And I think I see my way to making £2 10s. or £3 out of this particular little monkey, if only all of you would help me with suggestions—we’ll talk about it after dinner to-night.”

And so they got Nan established in these new quarters, surrounding her with every attention, and kindness, and care; and Sidney took possession of his rooms at the hotel, bringing down from Henley such books as he wanted; and very soon these four—Stephen from Friday to Sunday only—had fallen into a settled and simple and contented sort of life, with plenty of occupation and mutual interest. It is true that sometimes Nan would sink into profound and silent reverie, and hold herself aloof from the common talk; and she was fond of reading Australian papers—staring blankly at such names as Adelaide, and Melbourne, and Brisbane; and occasionally, when she began to get about a little, driving, a startled look would come to her face at sight of some distant figure—a look to be dissipated on nearer approach. But she was bound to show herself as cheerful as might be, if only out of gratitude for all this

kindness that was being showered upon her ; and the sensation of returning health and spirits was a wonderful and exhilarating thing ; and she was young—and her lover was with her, demanding assurances of her happiness.

“Another,” said Constance, with smiling and approving eyes, “another whom Avilion has restored. I wish I had begun by keeping a book.”

Now and again, of course, Sidney had to run up to town, sometimes to see about Nan’s affairs, sometimes to consult his publisher about the wood-cuts for the *Dionysiac* volume, which was now nearly ready. And on one of these occasions, when he was returning in the afternoon across St. James’s Park, he encountered Lady Helen : she was driving in an open barouche, apparently making for Constitution Hill, and she was alone. Well, he bided his time ; it was for her to say whether she would recognise him at all or not ; and she had proved herself a young person of capricious moods. But now, instead of treating him with explicit coldness, she stopped the carriage—and waited for him to approach.

“You are not at Henley, then ? ” she said, in some surprise. “Your mother went down this morning, to see if anything had happened——”

“I haven’t been at Henley for ever so long,” he said. “I wrote to her from Worthing——”

“Yes ; a hotel-address : of course she imagined you had run down there on a mere temporary visit,” Lady Helen answered him ; and then she hesitated for a second. “Where were you going just now ? ” she asked of a sudden.

“Victoria Station,” he told her.

“Will you drive home with me ? I shall not keep you two moments. I have something to say to you.”

It was exceedingly annoying, for he was on his way to catch the Brighton express ; but he was a good-natured lad ; and in other days Lady Helen had been able to ‘command him anything.’ He got into the carriage, and in a few minutes was driven to Upper Brook Street.

When they entered the house, she did not precede him upstairs to the drawing-room ; she asked him to step into the dining-room ; and there she left him, saying she would return in a moment. He wondered what was going to happen now. He hoped something amiable. He had no wish to quarrel with anybody. But he had a dim impression that his mother had endeavoured to complicate matters as between Lady Helen and himself ; and he knew that the younger woman had a resolute temper. Above all, he did not wish to be bothered ; he had some proofs of wood-cuts with him, that he was anxious to show to Nan, and to Constance, and to Stephen—who was coming down by a later train. Why should he be stopped and hindered ; and what interest had he in Upper Brook Street ?

When Lady Helen returned her usual gracious equanimity appeared to have deserted her ; she seemed disturbed ; and the fingers of one hand, that were clasped over some small object, were distinctly tremulous—whether this was involuntary or intentional it was not for him to say. He was standing by the window : she went up to him.

“ Sidney,” she said, with shyly downcast eyes, and there was quite a pretty tenderness in her tone, “ I am afraid we have not quite understood each other. I am afraid there has been misapprehension—fancies and dreams, perhaps—impracticable in this common work-a-day world. But at least we can part friends——”

“ Oh, yes, certainly ! ” he responded, much relieved : perhaps even now, with a smart hansom, he could catch the express ?

“ I mean,” she went on, with an attractive embarrassment, “ in view—of the settlement of my life—that I am looking forward to. Not even your mother knows as yet—but of course you must know—who else but you ? And if it is not quite definitely arranged—if, at the very last moment, one were to break off—but no, of course that is not to be thought of : the days for that kind of thing are long past. Only—you see—with this before me in the future—I

thought I ought to give you back what you gave me in other circumstances : you remember : I *did* promise to wear it for ever and ever—but it's the way of the world that things turn out differently——”

And timidly she held out the little Roman charm—the small gold bell mounted as a brooch.

“Oh, but it was not so important as all that !” he protested. “Won't you keep it?—a mere trifle—I thought you took a fancy to it——”

“I cannot,” she said, sadly. “It would only awaken memories. And you must give me back the ring I gave you——”

“I can send it to you,” he said. “It is at Henley.”

“Then this is good-bye !” She extended her hand to him, and it seemed to be trembling a little ; and her eyes, that were now upturned to his, were quite affectionate and regretful. “How strangely things turn out !” she said—still holding his hand, and regarding him. “It is not what one wishes ; it is what fate drives one to. At least I suppose so. We don't seem to have the power to shape things as we would have them. We can but submit. And as I say, Sidney, you and I can part friends.”

“Oh, yes, certainly,” he repeated—with a vague consciousness that it was high time for him to get away. And get away he did—though he missed the Brighton express, and in consequence received a severe scolding from Nan.

Not twenty minutes after he had gone Mrs. Hume drove up in a hansom ; and Lady Helen—already quite quit of any pretty agitation—followed her friend to her room, to hear of the abortive visit to Henley.

“I wanted to ask you about another thing,” Lady Helen said, comfortably seating herself. “Do you know how these announcements are sent to the papers ?”

She handed a slip to Mrs. Hume—and now her fingers were not in the least tremulous ; while she looked on with apparent indifference. Then, on this slip, Mrs. Hume read these clearly-pencilled words : ‘A marriage has been

arranged and will shortly take place between the Hon. Montague Francis Howe, son of Lord Grenfell of Garstang, and the Lady Helen Yorke, only daughter of the Earl and Countess of Monks-Hatton.'

"Helen, what is this!" she exclaimed, in affright.

"I suppose it ought to go to the papers," Lady Helen answered calmly. "Are they advertisements, do you know? Are they sent through one's bookseller? But perhaps I'd better leave Monty to see about such things—as soon as I give him permission."

"Mr. Howe?" her friend cried, still wholly aghast. "And about Captain Erle?"

"A man about town knows too much," the younger lady rejoined, with a touch of contempt.

"And Sidney!"

But at this Lady Helen became almost serious.

"My dear Mrs. Hume!" she said. "Really—really—have you not got that extraordinary delusion out of your head yet? Why, the very last thing in the world that ever could have happened! Sidney and I are very good friends—of course—and I hope we shall always remain so; but as for anything else—the idea was never to be thought of for a moment!" And Mrs. Hume sate staring at the slip of paper, that told her of the final ruin of her dearly cherished hopes.

She was soon to hear of another projected marriage, for Sidney had at length persuaded Nan to give herself over into his charge. She was at first reluctant and afraid; it seemed incredible to her that this wedding should take place, and her father be absent: was the bride to have no one to stand by her at such a moment? But she was alone and helpless; she could no longer encroach on the kindness of these good friends; and her father had plainly told her what he expected of her. Then Sidney pointed out that as their conjoint small fortunes would afford what would be for them an ample competence, they were at liberty to choose their place of abode where they pleased; and he

asked her (dreading the effect on her of any further inland experiments) what she thought of this same Worthing? It was quiet. It was cheerful and healthy. It was convenient for running up to town. And then she would have more or less of the society of Constance and Stephen, who on their side had become quite charmed with this companionship. Nan, shy, grateful, affectionate, agreed to everything he suggested; and then he took her away on rambling and imaginative house-hunting perambulations, which proved to be almost an idyllic occupation, in these golden autumn days.

Naturally he announced his intentions to his mother; and she, finding her own schemes all gone to wreck and ruin, resolved as a last wild resource to appeal to the family at large. What she had failed to do, with all her tact and cunning and audacity, perhaps their combined authority might do; if peradventure there was still a chance of saving him. And thus it was that on a certain afternoon three veritable sons of Anak arrived in Worthing; and no doubt they appeared as demi-gods to the nurse-maids wheeling perambulators along the esplanade. For these were a deputation: these were three of the 'handsome Humes'—with no other than the Squire of Ellerdale at their head. Sidney, whom they found in his rooms, was at first inclined to be angry at this interference and impertinence, as he considered it; but there was a ludicrous side; the ineptitude of the whole proceeding seemed farcical.

"Then I am to understand that nothing will move you?" the eldest brother said, sternly—for he did not like being treated with scorn. "You are absolutely determined to marry this girl—you are absolutely determined to bring a prize-fighter into the family——"

"You need not be alarmed," said Sidney. "The prize-fighter—who is not a prize-fighter—will never come near you. He is away at the other end of the world, and will remain there. Why he went there—why he insists on

remaining there—well, sometimes I have suspicions ; and if he has done this partly or mainly that his daughter should not suffer through any prejudice against himself, if he has done it merely that things should go easily for her, then I say he has made a sacrifice for her that I don't believe one of you would make for any one belonging to you, wife, mother, or child. But that is not the question. What I want to point out is that I don't propose to bring any one into the family, either father or daughter. My wife and I will most likely live here in Worthing ; but we don't ask any of you to come here, any more than we ask to be allowed to go to you. There is no need for any quarrel. The world is wide enough for all of us."

And indeed they eventually found they had come on a fool's errand, and were glad to have done with it ; sulkily or amicably, as their dispositions tended, they parted with him ; and left the hotel.

But on their way to the station an odd incident occurred. They were walking along the esplanade when they came in sight of two ladies, the younger and taller of whom was of such a singular and remarkable beauty as to draw all eyes to her. It was but a passing glimpse they had of her ; manners forbade more ; but all of them seemed equally struck ; and instinctively—when they had allowed those two to go some little distance—they turned, under pretence of looking along the beach.

"I'll bet you ten thousand pounds that is the girl!—I know it!—I am certain of it!" said the youngest of the three, vehemently.

"What a marvellous creature!—and look how she walks!" exclaimed the second, gazing after her.

But the eldest one, the grave one, spoke most to the point.

"I don't know," said he, slowly. "Must have been something exceptional to have turned Sidney into a pig-headed brute. . . . Well, if that is the girl, I think I should almost be inclined to ask her to Ellerdale for

Christmas — Sidney and her. . . . But I suppose the women wouldn't stand it."

And then the three giants strode onwards again towards the station. And Nan and Constance Weguelin also continued on their way, unaware that they had attracted any notice.

CHAPTER XXIII.

SPIES.

EVENTUALLY they fixed upon a house some little distance back from the sea-front, in the remoter part of West Worthing, the inducements being that there Nan would find herself mistress of a considerable garden, while Sidney, for working purposes, wanted one or two quiet rooms not overlooking any thoroughfare. Then began the process of nest-building; but here Nan showed the strangest diffidence; she seemed to say—'Don't you know that I was a failure at Crowhurst?—of what value can my advice be to you now?' And indeed, as the wedding-day drew near, it was not of the planning out of a library or the hanging up of portières that she was mainly thinking. She had become possessed by the conviction that if through any possibility her father were still in England, or had returned to England, he would not be very far away from the church-door when his daughter passed in. It was an unreasoning belief, perhaps; but she brooded over it; in visionary moments she imagined she could see a dusky figure in one of the pews, regarding the ceremony, with all unkindness and discontent and reproach quite gone from his eyes. And of these things she made confession to Constance Weguelin.

"But, my dear Nan," Constance said, "you have never doubted for a moment that your father did go away to Australia, and that he was resolved not to come back to England."

"Yes, I know," the girl made answer, in an absent kind of way. "That was what I believed. And perhaps it is so—perhaps—perhaps he is now in Australia—and not thinking of me, or of any one in this country. It may be so. But still—still—something seems to tell me that he will not be so very far away when we go into the church. It is a kind of dream; but sometimes dreams come true. And then that would make it all so different, Constance. You see, I have obeyed him, literally, up till now. I did not seek to go after him, to beg him to come back and give me another trial at Crowhurst. I did not advertise—or bother him. I obeyed him, as he wished. But this would be quite different. This would be his own doing. And if, when we came out of the church, I were to see him standing by—hanging back, rather—for that was always his way—I hope Sidney would not be vexed if I left him for a moment, and went over, and said, 'Surely you have come home for good now, Dodo!'" Then she added, in a lower voice: "And sometimes—sometimes, Constance—I am convinced it is going to happen."

Sidney, when he heard of these mysterious fancies, merely said—

"Well, it's a pity we are not fashionable folk, Nan; for then the marriage would be announced in the papers beforehand—and that would give public notice; and if there is any chance of your father being in this country——"

"If he is, he will know," she said, with superstitious certainty. "I have little fear about that. He always knew what was happening to me. But then, Sidney, if he were in the church, or outside the church, I may be so nervous as not to look out properly—perhaps you would——"

"Trust me for that, Nan," said he, cheerfully. "And if I set eyes on him anywhere, all the fixed and legitimate etiquette of the occasion must simply go to the wall: my first care will be to get hold of your father, and bring him home with us to the breakfast."

It was the quietest of weddings. There were perhaps

about a dozen strangers—mostly old women—in the pews ; and when Sidney, accompanied by his friend Stephen Weguelin, arrived, the briefest glance enabled him to make sure that Mr. Summers was not in this small building. Then again, when the ceremony was over, and the bridegroom brought forth his young bride into the clear sunlight of the outer world, there were some children to scatter flowers in her path (this was Constance's doing : she had heard of an incident outside St. Mary's Church, Henley), but in vain did he look beyond them, quickly scanning one or two groups of half-interested bystanders. Nan was all trembling when she got into the carriage.

"No sign of him?" she managed to say. He shook his head.

"Then it is my last chance," she murmured. "He will never come back now."

And yet it was little more than a year after these occurrences that Dick Erridge, in his chambers close by Regent Circus, was clearly expecting a visitor. The supper-table was laid for two ; he himself (in a sumptuous smoking-jacket) had seen to the careful adjustment of the lamps, profanely made out of old silver candlesticks ; and he had roused a roaring fire in the grate, though the winter was not yet come. And then he looked around, not without some satisfaction. There was now an air of travel about these rooms that formerly they did not possess. A trophy of savage weapons was placed over the chimney-piece—spears, clubs, boomerangs, and shields, surmounted by the hind paws of a kangaroo ; large prints of Australian race-courses hung on the walls ; on the couches were thrown specimens of Indian and Burmese embroidery, purchased from the wily Hindoo of Malta. For the rest, the proper wines had been decanted ; the champagne put temporarily in ice ; and on the top of one of the folded table-napkins was a card, bearing the simple legend 'Welcome to England !'

Dick kept pacing to and fro—looking from the windows

—listening at the top of the landing—going back to wake up the fire, or give a final touch to the pink shades of the lamps. And at last the longed-for sound was heard. He dashed down the stairs—opened the door—and was out on the pavement.

“Here you are at last!” he cried, in joyful tones—and he assisted the new comer to alight as if he had been an invalid. “Why, I couldn’t believe my eyes when I got your wire from Gib.—But where’s your luggage?”

“I left it at Paddington——”

“Well, well, never mind,” the eager host said. “Come along! We’ll see about arrangements afterwards. You and I are going to have a little bit of supper—for I know what that dismal jog-jog up from Plymouth is—and then I’ll give you all the news——”

He preceded his guest up the stair, threw open the door, and awaited his entrance. Mr. Summers stepped into the room, looking around him as if there was something unfamiliar in this place: in his own appearance there was but little alteration—perhaps his eyes were a trifle more worn and sad.

“Dick,” he said, as he sank into the easy-chair that his friend had drawn forward for him, “I’m a sneak—and that’s the fact.”

“Oh, yes, certainly!” responded the other, with magnanimous scorn. “I quite agree. Precisely so. And it would please me down to the ground to see any noble sportsman go up and say as much to you: in the next minute he’d be under the impression that the whole everlasting Tower of Babel had sprung into the air and come down on him again——”

“All the way home from Australia,” Mr. Summers went on, as he stared blankly into the fire, “there was plenty of time for thinking; and the fact is, Dick, I grew to believe that there must be something within us that’s a deal stronger than ourselves, something that can drive us to do what we don’t want to do. I did not want to be here this night;

indeed I did not. I had made up my mind I should never see England again ; and was all the more reconciled to it when I heard that everything was going on well with Nan. And then, Dick—then, you see, Dick—when I got this last announcement from you—the clipping from the paper—something seemed to come over me. The fancy of Nan being a young mother—the wondering whether I could not get a far-off glimpse of her, even a mile away—a glimpse of her pride and her happiness—yes, indeed, a mile away—I wouldn't ask to go nearer than that : well, I could not resist. There was something stronger than me that got a grip of me. It was no use. I was ashamed of myself—I tried to hold back—and then—then of a sudden I took a passage in the first steamer that was sailing—and here I am."

He looked up, almost sternly.

"But mind you, Dick," said he, "I trust to your word of honour that you gave me before. My coming back now, just for a glimpse of Nan in her new station, is not to be allowed to lead to the undoing of what has been done—I would rather go right back to Plymouth to-morrow, and take the next steamer out. My going away has worked well ; and it cost a little, I can tell you—I suppose Nan didn't like being left like that. But everything is going on first-rate now ; and if I am to have a look at her as the young mother, it must be with caution—it must be managed with tremendous caution, Dick——"

"Oh, there's no trouble about that," the younger man said, airily. "I saw her yesterday."

"You saw Nan yesterday ?" Summers exclaimed, with a violent start. He appeared to be quite bewildered. "Yesterday ? And where was she ? And what was she like ? How was she looking ?"

"What was she looking like ?" Erridge repeated. "Well, I should say that wild roses in June were a fool to her ; that's all I can think of, for I'm an unpoetical person, thank God. As it happened, the day was particularly bright and clear, and you should have seen her complexion, and her

light-brown hair ; and she was laughing and talking, and that always suited her, you know ; the little nursemaid was pushing the perambulator, and Miss Anne—or Mrs. Sidney Hume, rather, to give her all her dignity—was walking by the side of it, and chatting and laughing to the occupant of that important vehicle. I don't suppose the kid understood a blessed word ; but the smiling young mother was quite a picture, don't you know—you should have seen the women-folk turn to look at her—it was something they had to gaze at, I assure you. I felt quite proud of her myself ; I would have given twenty pounds to be able to go up and remind her of my ignominious existence ; but that might have got me into trouble—awkward questions——”

Mr. Summers interrupted him.

“ Dick, man, tell me ! ” he said, with an almost piteous solicitude. “ Do you—think I could get—a sight of Nan—looking like that ? ”

“ Why not ? Why not ? ” Dick rejoined. “ But here is something more immediate and practical. I'll tell you afterwards all about what we're going to do : in the meantime you take this chair. The things are just coming up. Help yourself to an appetiser—try one of those sardines with a touch of cayenne, and a few threads of anchovy ; and this is Marcobrunner of '70—'70, mind you—and in capital condition. Yes, here's the soup. Nothing much to follow : a grilled sole, a cutlet, a steak-and-oyster pudding, and a bird to wind up with. But I thought we'd better have our chat here, old man, instead of at some public place——”

“ Yes, yes ; yes, yes,” said his companion, who cared little for this food or drink compared with the prospect of his hearing more, and still more, about Nan. “ You're an awful good chap, Dick, to have taken all this trouble—I mean about going down to Worthing——”

“ I've been down there the whole of the last three days ! ” cried Dick, as he ladled out the fragrant, pellucid, steaming soup. “ For this is how I am situated, just at present.

Here's my old grandfather insisting on my going away down to him the day-after to-morrow ; and goodness knows when he'll let me come back. Got it into his ancient noddle that my brilliant conversation is a cure for lumbago ; perhaps it is ; I don't know ; I don't see him get any suppler ; he rises from his chair with his back bent as if he wanted to play on an invisible violoncello. However, that leaves me to-morrow to go down with you to Worthing ; and of course I wanted to see how the land lay up to the last moment. Oh, I tell you I'd make a first-rate private detective—when I give up curing lumbago. Since I came back from Australia, I've learnt all the little ways of that household. She generally goes out in the morning, about eleven or half-past, with the peram. and the dot of a housemaid ; the husband remains at home, no doubt at his literary labours—by Jove, what did I do with that notice of his book—I clipped it out of the *Times* to send you—two columns—fancy !—they wouldn't give as much importance to a new burlesque at the Gaiety !——”

“ But about Nan, Dick—about Nan,” said the other.

“ Well, sometimes she does a bit of shopping ; and then sometimes she goes out to the end of the pier, and sits in a sheltered place there, smiling and nodding to that little idiot that doesn't understand a word she says ; and sometimes a lady-friend of hers comes out and sits and chats with her. Then it's back home towards one—luncheon, I presume ; and then again in the afternoon her husband and she go driving—and she takes the reins——”

“ Doesn't she sit well, Dick ?—hasn't she style ? ” her father interpolated, eagerly.

“ Then they appear to have one or two friends down there ; and sometimes they dine with them ; and sometimes the friends come round.—But here, what the devil are we doing ! ” Dick cried abruptly. “ We have forgotten to drink his health ! ”

“ Whose health ? ”

“ Why, the lord and master—the son and heir—the

important person in the household. Fill your glass, old man—that's Pol Roger of '84, and as good as they make it; and I can give you his name, too; for I thought I might as well look in at the registrar's, just to let you have all the details right and proper. So here's to the young gentleman, by the style and title of James Sidney Hume—and long life to him!"

But Nan's father did not raise his glass: he seemed stupefied. Dick drained his with a will. Then he chanced to look over.

"What's up now? Not drink his health? That's high treason——"

"Oh, yes,—his health—I beg your pardon," said the other, quite humbly. And then he added, with a timid glance: "But—but what did you say, Dick—what did you say was the name of the boy?——"

"Why, James Sidney Hume—and a very pretty compliment to you, I take it!"

"No, no!" Mr. Summers said, hastily—and he appeared to be much perturbed. "They could not mean that. They couldn't have been thinking of me—Nan couldn't have been thinking of me—after the way I left her at Crowhurst. It's a common name, man—it would naturally occur to them—just as Tom or Harry might—they couldn't have been thinking of me at all. You must be mistaken, Dick; you're sometimes mistaken, you know; you're too positive about things——"

"Well, I'm positive about this thing anyway," said Dick, boldly, "that as far as that young chap is called James he is called after you: take it as you like, but there's the fact."

For several seconds the elder of the two men was silent and plunged in profound reverie. Then he said, slowly, and almost as if to himself—

"She's a strange girl, is Nan. Perhaps she may not be thinking so hardly of me after all."

They went down by an early train next morning; but they did not go on to West Worthing station, for fear of

being recognised ; they stopped at Worthing proper ; and first of all, and with great circumspection, they proceeded to hunt out lodgings in a secluded part of the town. Then came the question as to how long these humble apartments might be wanted. Mr. Summers glanced guiltily towards his companion.

“I will take them by the week, Dick,” he said. “You see, I am uncertain when I may sail ; and I should not like to go back without having an evening or two with you, for the sake of old times——”

“And surely to goodness the lumbago treatment can’t last more than a fortnight !” Erridge said. “Well, yes, better take the rooms by the week. Right you are. You can arrange about meals afterwards.”

Dick was quite jaunty ; he was going about with his great friend and hero ; and that was enough for him. But Mr. Summers was most pitiaibly anxious, and even agitated, as they now set out for West Worthing ; he kept gazing far ahead, and glancing nervously down each successive thoroughfare, though Dick had assured him there was not the slightest chance of their encountering Nan in this quarter of the town.

“It’s too great a risk—I shouldn’t have done it,” his companion kept repeating. “I yielded, Dick. I’m playing the coward. Look what it is I put in danger—all the happy state of affairs that was brought about by a good deal of suffering. Yes, a good bit, my lad. I had a bad time the night I left Crowhurst ; and a bad time the day you and I sailed away from Plymouth ; and Nan, too—I dare say she thought the letter rather cruel—she may have cried a little—you see, I had to make it rough. Rough to get smooth. Rough to get smooth afterward. And now that everything is going right, here am I risking it all—pure selfishness, that’s what it is, Dick——”

He grasped his friend’s arm. They had come to the top of a street, at the far end of which the sea and the sea-front were visible.

"That's the way she passes along?" he asked, hurriedly. "But I am not going down there yet. No, no, I must lay plans. I must see everything clear——"

"It is after one," Erridge said to him. "They will be in-doors by now, and we can go and have a look at their house with comparative safety——"

"My good fellow, there must be no comparative, it must be absolute safety!" Summers insisted. "I will not go anywhere near, unless I am positively certain we shall not be seen——"

"I can manage it—I can manage it," his friend rejoined: he had acquired a perfect knowledge of the topography of this neighbourhood.

And so they made their way circuitously—keeping well back from the sea-front—until Mr. Summers's guide signified to him to stop.

"That is the house over yonder," Dick said, in an unnecessary whisper. "The dining-room window is to the left of the steps; but I don't suppose they could see us—not even if they came outside."

It was rather a large house, of irregular construction, set in a garden that was surrounded by a low wall of black-gray flint and red brick. On the southern side a row of young trees separated it from the adjacent garden; and all around, within the flint and brick wall, there was a hedge of some spindrift-resisting shrub. The gate was of oaken bars; there were steps leading up to the front door; and round one portion of the building there was a balcony, on the first story. Altogether it was not a very remarkable-looking place; but this man gazed at it with the intensest interest—at each one of its windows, indeed, as if perchance some glimmer of a human shape might appear there. But there was no sign of life. A fishmonger's boy teasing a small terrier—which seems to be the natural attitude of a fishmonger's boy—was the only creature they saw in all this voiceless waste of villas and gardens.

"It's the strangest thing to be so near Nan," her father

said, and he also spoke in an undertone, though it was quite uncalled-for. "Many a night during the voyage, when I was lying awake, I used to think she seemed millions and millions of miles away, and that it was not possible I should ever come within sight of her again. And she's just over there ! It's a good big house, Dick. A bigger house than Crowhurst. But she won't have any difficulty : she's the cleverest creature of a manager you ever saw—sharp and prompt—every item of the books to be checked—I can tell you she brought one or two of those Henley tradesmen to their senses. And reasonable with servants ; reasonable, but reasonably firm, too ; she would have her way—the young wretch !—and then she was always so good-humoured that they couldn't sulk. Oh, she's a clever one, is Nan ! And she's looking well, you said ? Looking particularly well, didn't you say ? I shouldn't wonder, now, if the sea-air was better for her. Why it's the strangest thing—Nan to be over there—perhaps just behind that window—or seated at the table—and everything neat and trim, I'll be bound—everything bright and neat and trim—and bits of flowers—she was such a clever creature with her fingers—just a touch here and there. And to think of her aspiring to the dignity of a mother !—the cheek of her !—but looking quite young and as pretty as ever, you said ?—and light-hearted, too—talking and laughing, you said—I liked to hear that, Dick—I liked to hear that—that was Nan's natural self—I liked to hear about the young mother on the sea-front, smiling and talking so that people were quite taken with the look of her——"

He was rambling on, in a vague maze of wonder and delight, when of a sudden he gripped his companion and tried to slink back a bit, though indeed they were both in a sufficiently sheltered corner. For at this moment there drove up to the front of the house they were scrutinising an open fly, and from it a lady descended, a silver-haired woman of unusual stature and commanding carriage. She passed in by the gate, crossed the garden, went up the steps, and rang the bell.

"Come away, Dick, come away!" said Summers, anxiously. "She may be calling for them—they may come out again with her—let's get away——"

Well, Dick Erridge was nothing loth; for it was well past two o'clock; and they would have to walk back to Worthing before they could, in security, get some small snack of luncheon somewhere. But as soon as they were at a safe distance from the house, Mr. Summers's jubilation broke all bounds.

"Who was right, then—who was right, Dick?" he said, with a kind of triumphant eagerness—and yet still in an undertone, as if the very walls had ears. "You were always doubtful about the necessity of my leaving England; but now I can show you—now I can prove it! Do you know who that was who drove up to the house?——"

"No, I don't," was the reply. "But she would make a rare good figure in a ballet of Amazons—the Queen of the Amazons—centre of the stage—the Alhambra for choice—she'd be worth her weight in gold to any management——"

"Man alive, talk sense!" Summers exclaimed, though he was clearly in no quarrelsome mood. "That was Mrs. Hume!—that was Sidney Hume's mother!—the representative of the whole family—they'll all follow where she leads—and didn't I tell you that everything would go well and happily with Nan?——"

"It's no great thing to have a call from one's mother-in-law," Dick said, peevishly.

"There's some things I can't drive into your head, Dick, and that's the fact," his companion rejoined with impatience. "Do you think that Mrs. Hume, or any of the family, would be going near that house if I had remained in England? I saw well enough how the land lay. And I don't blame anybody. Why should I blame anybody? People have their prejudices—quite natural. Only, don't you see, my lad, as soon as I was out of the way, then came the chance of everything being made right for Nan. And it's working, Dick; it's working; they'll all come round to her

—you mark my word ; she's such a clever creature ; she's got such a trick of taking hold of people—it's her pretty eyes, I think——”

He laughed—a little, short laugh ; and he struck the clenched fist of his right hand into the hollow palm of his left.

“Man, man, Dick, I told you ! I told you my way was the right way. You were always a doubting kind of a chap. And now will you believe—when you've seen Mrs. Hume herself drive up to the house ? And it has all been so successful—it has all gone so well for Nan, as I knew it would—that it makes it all the more necessary I should take every precaution, until I get safely away to Australia again. Oh, you won't find me going too near. I'll watch about. I'll go early, and look around, and keep out of danger, until my opportunity comes. I'll choose my time ; for after all, Dick—after all—if Nan were to be down on the sea-front—walking along in the way you told me—well, I'd like to be just a *little* nearer—just to see she was the same happy kind of creature she used to be at Crowhurst—I'd like to see her as you described her—laughing and nodding to the little fellow—until the people turned to look at the young mother—because she was so pretty to look at——” He brought himself up short. “Well, I'm an infernal fool, Dick. I beg your pardon—I won't talk any more. But—but—perhaps you understand, Dick : I shall be such a short time in England ; and—and this glimpse of Nan means a good deal to me.”

Hungry as he was, Dick needed no apology ; it was enough that he had been of some service to his great hero and friend. And then again, when they had sought the seclusion of a backward-lying inn in Worthing, Jim Summers had not a thought for the meal that his companion ordered in.

“The dusk, Dick,” he said, “the dusk will be my best time for getting near to the house. I can get as near to the house as I like then. Night after night—as long as I

remain in England—that will be my safest chance.” He laughed to himself, and rubbed his hands, in nervous anticipation and delight. “And for that time at least, Dick—for that time at least—Nan will have her old bull-dog back again.”

CHAPTER XXIV.

CONCLUSION.

THERE was a brisk south-westerly breeze blowing, with flying shreds of cloud; the shallow waters of the Channel, racing and chasing, shivered in silver under swift bursts of sunlight; while thick-seething, opaque, tawny-yellow waves broke and thundered tumultuously up the shelving beach, receding again with a long roar of grinding gravel. It was a fresh, invigorating morning, full of movement and change and anticipation: it was easy to guess that Nan would not remain long in-doors on such a day.

“Over two weeks—nearer three weeks—of what you might call perfect happiness,” Mr. Summers was saying, in his grave and deliberate fashion, as he and Dick Erridge walked along Worthing pier together. “That’s a good lot, Dick. That’s a good lot, even if it were spread over a whole lifetime. Many a poor devil has never had a single day. And when I am away back in Melbourne again, there’ll be such heaps of things to remember——”

“But look here,” said Dick, glancing rather anxiously around, “isn’t this rather too open? Isn’t this rather conspicuous? If you are so bent on leaving England without having been recognised——”

“I’ll show you, Dick; you just wait a minute; I’ve found the safest corner in the whole town,” his companion said, confidently.

So they walked on to the end of the pier, which is mainly occupied by a large building given over in the season to concerts, lectures, and the like; but now, out of the

season, it had been dismantled ; and when they entered they found the place practically empty, save for the stacked piles of chairs, while through the open doors the winds of heaven blew freely. Then Mr. Summers showed him a recess just within the front entrance—probably at other times used as a box for the ticket collector ; and adjacent was a window commanding a view of the whole length of the pier.

“ Now do you understand, Dick ? ” he said, eagerly. “ I can see her come all the way down ; and she passes so close—so close, man, it is as if you were speaking to her—I’ve heard her say things as she went by. Fancy being so near as that—actually listening to Nan’s voice : that is better than watching her about a mile off along the Parade ! Now let’s go and see if there are any signs of her.” And hardly had they got outside again when he exclaimed joyfully : “ Yes, yes ; I thought so ; always about this time ; yonder she is ! And the nursemaid with the perambulator : they’re almost certainly coming out here. Now mind you, Dick, keep well back—keep well back. Oh, you’ll see her clearly enough—you’ll find her come quite close by the window.”

And then again, after considerable waiting, when Nan and her small charge at length drew near, he became more and more excited. He spoke in undertones, in a sort of trembling ecstasy of delight.

“ Don’t you think she’s prettier than ever, Dick ? I’m certain the sea-air suits her ! Did you ever see such a freshness of complexion ? And how finely she walks !—a free, light step—that’s good health and good spirits, you know, as well as a good figure. No wonder the Worthing folk turn round to look at the pretty young mother—I suppose it isn’t very good manners, Dick—but I like to see them do it—I like it. The Queen of the place she is !—the Queen of the place !—you should watch a shopman smirk and smile when he crosses the pavement to her phaeton—for she was always so good-natured and friendly

with every one—the cleverest creature in making friends!—Now, Dick, not a whisper——”

They came along. The young mother carried in her hand a folded newspaper—probably she had received it from the postman just as they were leaving the house, for the wrapper was not yet taken off—and with this instrument she was engaged in teasing her precious infant, so as to draw his attention towards herself, while she smiled and talked and laughed to him. They passed by so close that Dick, dreading some stray glance, involuntarily fell back; but Nan’s father remained looking after her, in a kind of entrancement. The vision passed almost instantly: then there was nothing but this wide, bare concert-room, with its open doors and its stacked chairs.

“Sometimes she goes round, and walks up and down the pier again,” her father said, in an excited undertone, “and sometimes she chooses a sheltered corner to sit in——”

“I’ll find out in a second,” said his companion, moving off to the other open door.

“Cautiously—cautiously, Dick,” Summers said, almost as if he would restrain him—but indeed the younger man showed the utmost circumspection.

And in about a minute he had returned.

“She is reading the newspaper,” said he. “So that if you did want to get away—if you think this is rather a risky place—we might get safely off now.”

“I would rather wait—if you don’t mind, my good chap,” said his friend, whose eyes hungered and thirsted for some further, even the briefest, glimpse of Nan. “We are quite safe. She would never dream of coming into this empty and draughty building. And then, you see, Dick, every additional time that I can have a look at her is something for me to think back on when I am out yonder. You don’t mind, do you?”

“Mind?” said Dick—and it was all he would say.

So they remained in this deserted place; but their stay

was not of long duration ; for a few minutes thereafter they perceived approaching a lady whom both recognised as a friend of Nan's, though neither knew her name.

"Sometimes she comes out and takes Nan away for a little walk in the town—to see the shops, very often. We'd better be ready, Dick——"

The warning was given just in time. These two had hardly returned to the opportune recess by the front entrance when the little cortège outside came into sight ; and as they passed the open door fragments of their talk were distinctly audible.

"Christmas ?" Nan was saying. "Well, they've asked us to Ellerdale—the family gathering, you know—and Sidney has been so kind about it, leaving it to me to decide ; but I think I would rather spend a quiet Christmas here, with you and Sidney and Stephen——"

"That is wrong—that is wrong," said her father, under his breath, when they had got well away. "She should have gone to Ellerdale. But perhaps travelling with the child would be awkward. "Well, well, all in good time—all in good time ! It's all going right now !"

He followed her with straining vision, until she was hardly recognisable in the distance, while Dick Erridge stood by in acquiescent silence. But it was reserved for Dick to make a notable discovery, when at length they left the empty concert-room and passed round by the head of the pier. They came to the sheltered part that Nan frequently chose ; and here, by accident, Dick perceived a torn piece of paper that the wind had blown into a corner. It looked like a newspaper-wrapper ; and when, out of idle curiosity, he picked it up, a newspaper-wrapper it was found to be ; and not only that but it had Nan's married name and her Worthing address on it.

"A Melbourne paper ?" said he, with some surprise. "That was a Melbourne paper, then, she was reading ? And it comes from the office : I suppose she gets it regularly——"

"A Melbourne paper?" her father instantly repeated.
"Let me see!"

He took the torn wrapper into his hands, and gazed at it long and thoughtfully. Then he glanced at Dick with some diffidence.

"What do you imagine, Dick—could interest her—in an Australian paper?"

"Why, the chance of hearing something about you," Erridge made answer, boldly.

For a moment Summers looked bewildered: then he said, almost with a frown—

"No, no! That is impossible. That is all done with. She would not be thinking about me. I told her to go her own way, and leave me alone. Bluntly enough I told her—bluntly enough." And yet—somehow—he did not throw aside this worthless scrap of brown paper. He smoothed it, rather; and folded it; and eventually, when Dick wasn't looking, placed it in his pocket-book. Here, indeed, was another talisman to summon up visions and dreams—when he was far away on the black-heaving waters.

That afternoon, as the dusk was coming down, these two were in Mr. Summers's lodgings; and he was seated at a table, with a number of written pages before him; while Dick stood before the fire, the inevitable cigarette between his fingers.

"This is a letter," Mr. Summers was saying, "which I have been trying to put together; and I hope to give it over to your keeping before I sail on Friday. I'm not used to such things; I may have to write it all over again, if I can find the time——"

"I'm going down to Plymouth with you, you know," the other interposed.

"Will you really? That's like you, Dick. Well, this is a letter for Nan; and you are not to take it to her or send it to her unless you hear that something has happened to me. My tether isn't likely to be a long one; anyhow, I rely on you, Dick, to keep this letter until you hear that it's

all over with me ; then you can give it to her—but not till then. For the fact is, I didn't see any use in her believing all her life through that I was really impatient with her at Crowhurst, and that I left because I was tired of the place ; and this is a kind of confession. I have been thinking over one or two little things : now, for example, her getting those Australian papers—I have been thinking she might not be so angry with me, after all—for she's a queer kind of creature—very generous and forgiving ; and I would like to be set right with her, when no harm can be done. It's a difficult business—I've been at it two or three nights—to get everything clear——”

He took up these sheets, and was soon lost in the contemplation of them ; for it was as if he were speaking to Nan. He studied phrases and passages here and there, to make sure that she could not fail to understand his meaning.

‘ . . . For it's the real truth that is in this letter. And it never was true that I got tired of Crowhurst, or of the way we lived there ; no, indeed ; it was a proud and happy time for me ; and I wished it could have gone on for ever. But it was only a trial, after all ; and I knew that in any case my time would probably be short ; so when I saw the chance of your being well and happily settled, you may be sure I welcomed it. And then I came to see that it would be easier for you, it would make it smother for you with all of the Hume family, if I was out of the way ; and that is why I pretended to be tired of Crowhurst, and left you free to choose your own friends ; so that everything should go well ; but now I want you to know the truth, and this letter will not be delivered until it's all over with me, so that no harm can be done to any one, and you need not worry. . . . That is what I most want to say, dear Nan, that you need not in any way grieve about me, whatever may have happened when you get this letter ; for even within these last three weeks I have received far more happiness than any human being deserves, much less one like

me. All these three weeks I have been in Worthing, seeing you every day, sometimes twice or thrice a day ; and the boy, too ; and the delight when I saw you—but I cannot write about it. I was quite close by you, many a time, at the end of the pier. Sometimes I could hear a few words when you were passing ; and you may imagine what that sound was to me after being so long away. I say again that I don't believe any human being ever deserved to have three weeks of such splendid happiness, much less me ; so there's nothing for you to be sorry about, Nan ; I've had my day, and am more than content, as well I might be. . . . There's another thing that I've spoken to you about before. You must show yourself considerate with your husband's family ; not proud and independent, even though your husband himself should be inclined to back you up in that ; for it's a difficult thing for people to give up their prejudices ; and you ought to be grateful, instead of independent. It will be the best in the long run ; and it always was easy for you to be friendly ; it will be easier than keeping up any family division. You must look to them now. Here's Dick trying to make me believe that the Australian paper you were reading on the pier was because you sometimes had a thought for your poor old Dodo ; and if it was so, that's very kind of you, Nan ; and the naming of the boy—if I'm not too presumptuous in guessing—that was another thing made me wonder whether you were so very vexed with me because of the way I left you at Crowhurst. But it's to them you must turn now ; and be grateful for civil treatment, that is the least you can do. . . . And now, my dear brave lass, this is to say good-bye, from whatever quarter it may come to you. . . .

He put the leaves a little way aside, and looked up. His eyes seemed somewhat tired.

"Did you say you were going with me down to Plymouth, Dick ?" he asked.

"Certainly," was the prompt answer. "Ay, and if it weren't for the grumbling of the old grandfather, I'd go all

the trip out with you. - Well, we'll maybe meet under the Southern Cross again—and that not so long away."

"I'll give you the letter on the Saturday morning," said Mr. Summers, absently, "whether I alter any of it or not. Perhaps Nan will understand it as it is." And therewith he put the sheets in an envelope, and placed that in his travelling-bag. At the same moment the landlady came in with the lamp. And that was a signal and a summons; for this was the hour at which he was used to wander along to West Worthing, on the chance of getting a glimpse of Nan through the newly-lit windows.

The darkness of night had fallen; the streets were almost deserted; in the distance they could hear the sullen moan of the Channel. Both men walked for the most part in silence; for there were many things to think of, in view of the imminent leave-taking at Plymouth. Yet the elder of these two was in no sombre mood.

"It won't be so bad, Dick, going away this time," he said, presently. "For I've seen with my own eyes that everything is happily fixed with Nan; and I'm taking away with me whole heaps of fine things to think over. I wish I could give a sovereign to the girl who brings the lamps into Nan's dining-room; she hardly ever lets down the blind—at least not until they're seated at the table; very kind of the wench—if she only knew."

As they drew near the house, they went forward with greater caution; but indeed there was no one about; and when at length they ventured right up to the low wall, they could survey both house and garden without any fear of detection, for they were effectually screened by the hedge of tamarisk. As yet the dining-room window was dark: the lights were all on the upper floor. But as they waited, the black panes were suddenly changed to a dull yellow: a servant-maid had brought in a lamp, which she placed on the table. She went away and returned with another: there was now quite a cheerful glow in the room. And so far as they could make out—for they were looking

at an upward angle, and from some little distance—she forthwith proceeded to lay the dinner-things; while, having no fear of being spied upon in this secluded neighbourhood, she had omitted to let down the blind.

She left the room again. By-and-by there was the sound of a gong. Presently there appeared four young, or youngish, people, who entered in an informal sort of way—talking and laughing to each other, in fact—and took their places: Nan coming up to the hither end of the table, so that, when she sate down, with her back to the window, all that her father could see of her, in the light of the lamp, was the outline of her cheek and a soft aureole round her hair.

“Another picture!” he exclaimed, in whispered exultation. “Another picture to take away with me! Dick, my lad, I’ve had some luck—I’ve had some luck this trip, and no mistake!”

“But, I say, what’s that going on over there?” Dick made answer, also in an undertone.

His eyes had not been so much engrossed as those of his companion. He had chanced to descry, at the further end of the garden, and by the darkened side of the house, the dusky figure of a man who came cautiously over the low wall—parting a way for himself through the tamarisk shrubs—and who then peered warily around. The end of a ladder next appeared, being pushed over from the adjacent garden; and finally, when the ladder had been hauled through, a second figure followed. All this had been but dimly visible; for the only light anywhere reaching this part of the premises was that of a gas-lamp in the public roadway, and that was some distance off.

“Why, they’re thieves!” said Dick, in great excitement. “By the living Jingo, we’ll nab them!”

“Nonsense, nonsense!” Mr. Summers said, impatiently—for he was loth to have to take his away eyes from that glorified window, even for a moment. “They’re workmen!”

"They're not workmen!" Dick insisted—and it was well that his vehemence was drowned by the roar of the surge along the distant beach. "Look at them—they're taking off their boots! They're good, honest crib-crackers, and they'll have that ladder up against the balcony in another minute. Look at them sneaking down under the bushes—come along, man!—the Johnnies have no idea what an awful hole they've got into this journey!"

But Summers shrank back.

"No, no," he said. "There might be a noise; the people would come out from the house; and Nan would find me here. No, no; let the fellows take a few candlesticks or things—what's the difference! Or we can walk down to the sea-front, and send along a couple of policemen——"

He suddenly stopped—and his voice altered.

"Dick," said he, as if in breathless dismay, "if they were to get into the house—if Nan were by chance to go up to her room—why, the fright might kill her! The fright—might kill her." And then he instantly added, between his teeth: "By God, they shall not get into the house!"

"Then come round by the other garden," Dick said, as they hurriedly left their ambush. "They may have put wires across the lawn. We will follow in just where they led."

It was a matter of little difficulty: their swift movements were completely screened by the wall and the hedge and the row of young trees. Then, when Summers slipped over the first thing he saw was that the ladder had been placed against the dark balcony, and that one of the men was already half way up, while his accomplice waited to see him gain the iron rail before also ascending. And little did this latter guess the fate that was now behind him. With a bound as of a wild beast on its prey Summers was upon him, and down he went, with two strenuous hands fixed in his throat.

"Here, Dick—pin him!—bash his head if he stirs—I'll get the other one in a minute."

But by this time the other scoundrel had gained the balcony, and was now looking down on the capture of his companion, while as for himself he was caught like a rat in a trap—unless, indeed, he dared to risk the hold of certain euonymus bushes trained up against the wall. And here was his pursuer mounting the ladder—a little way up—half way up: then the hunted man, as a last desperate device, caught the end of the ladder, and with all his might threw it from him: for a second it hung and swayed, then it went over, falling heavily, with Summers underneath. This was the crash that startled those within: Sidney and Stephen Weguelin came rushing out, to see what had happened.

They found Dick Erridge kneeling by a prostrate and senseless body—the two thieves he had thought nothing more of when he saw his friend hurled down.

"Are you hurt, old chap?" he was asking. "Not badly, do you think?"

There was no answer.

"We must carry him in-doors," Dick said; and as they proceeded to do so, he gave a word of explanation. "There were two men trying to break into the house—he was afraid his daughter might come upon them—and we attempted to get hold of them. Don't tell her, if you can help it—he would rather not have her know he was here——"

But this was Nan herself who was at the head of the steps; and it was with a piteous cry of anguish she recognised the sad burden they bore into the hall; and it was with wringing hands she followed them into the room. They laid him on a couch.

"Dodo, you have come back to me!—say you have come back to me!" she cried, and she clung to the impassive fingers that hung helpless.

There was no reply from the death-like, ashen-gray face.

and the pallid lips. And meanwhile confusion prevailed in the house—one running for brandy—another sending off for a doctor, and the like ; but Nan took no heed of such things—she only continued her despairing appeal—with agony in her voice :

“Dodo, won’t you speak to me ! It’s Nan ! It’s Nan that’s beside you ! Dodo, can’t you hear me !—it’s Nan—it’s Nan that’s talking to you !——”

And at last he moved slightly—slightly, and heavily, and wearily ; and his left hand travelled slowly up to his heart, where it lay half-clenched. Then for a space there was silence and short, difficult breathing. When finally he managed to open his eyes, it was Nan’s eyes he found fixed on his—so eager, so imploring, so full of the old affection and companionship and gratitude.

“Your bull-dog, Nan,” he struggled to say, with something of a forced smile, “has been—hard hit—this time——”

“But you’ve come back to me, Dodo !—you’ve come back to me !—you’re not going away any more !——”

“There’s a letter,” he said, obviously with great exertion, “—Dick will give it to you—I never was tired—of Crowhurst——”

Suddenly his face altered—he drew a short, quick, gasping breath—and the next second they saw that all was over—all of them, that is to say, but Nan, who did not seem to realise what had happened until her husband gently raised her and led her, half-unconscious, from the room.

When Sidney returned, Dick Erridge was still standing by the side of the couch, crying like a child.

“There’s the best friend I ever had,” he said, when he had mastered himself somewhat. “And the straightest man that ever breathed. . . . I’ll bring you the letter, either to-night or to-morrow morning, whichever you like. But mind you tell her this. No man knew her father, and his ways of thinking, better than I did ; and I know that

this is the very end he would himself have chosen. You tell her that. I was in Australia with him. Many a night we sate up talking on the voyage out ; and over there too ; and I know what he was thinking. He guessed that his time was about drawing near a close ; and if he had had his choice of every way, this is the end he would have chosen. You tell her that. And tell her he has been down here for some weeks, and just as happy as he could be in seeing her from time to time. You never saw a man so delighted. He just lived for her——”

“And died for her, too, as it would seem,” Nan’s husband said. And therewith came the ringing of a bell, and a knock at the outer door. It was the doctor who had arrived.

THE END.

The first of these was the fact that the
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